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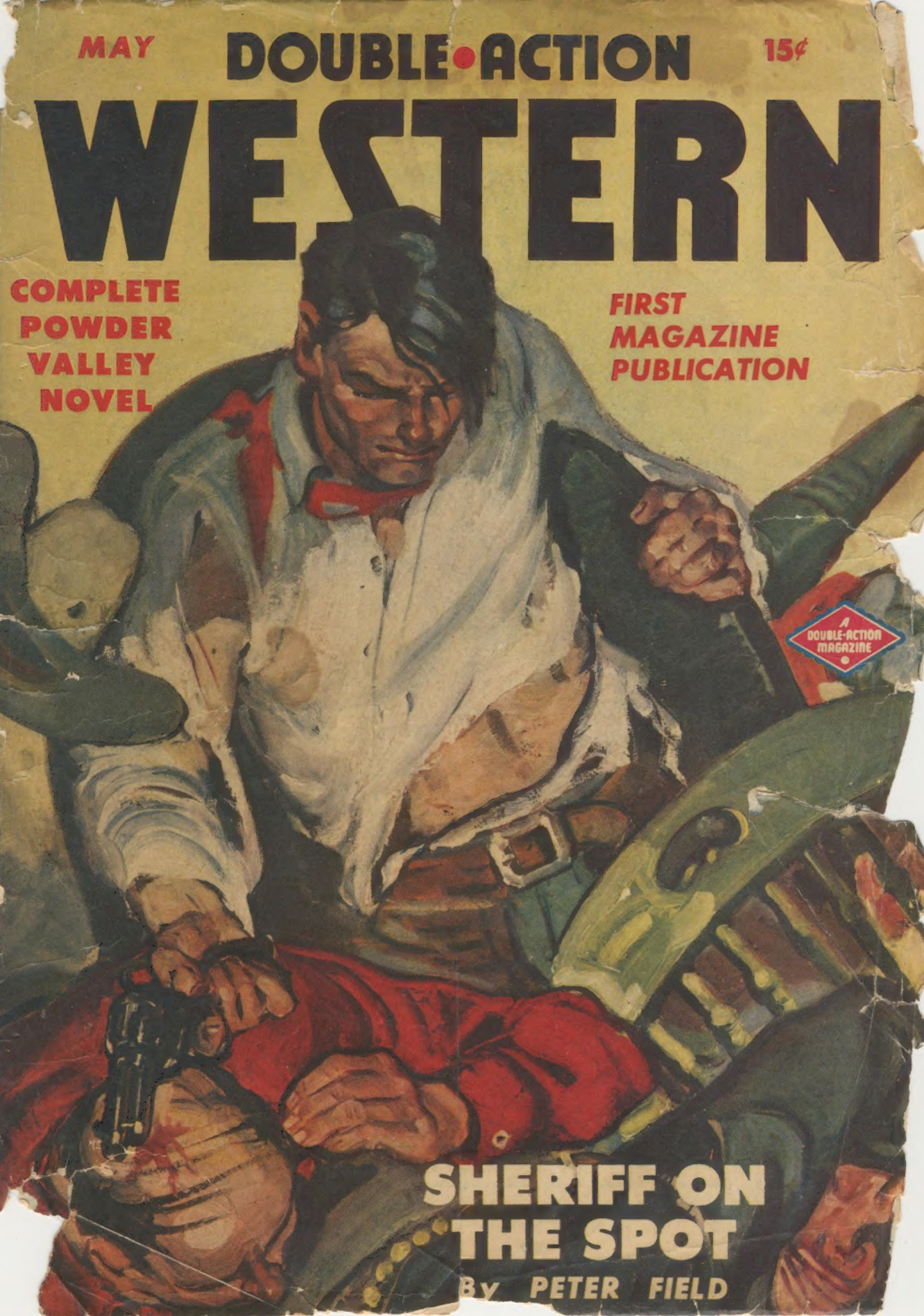
FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION



SHERIFF ON THE SPOT

By PETER FIELD

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 10 ★ ★ ★ May, 1944 ★ ★ ★ Number 6

COMPLETE POWDER VALLEY NOVEL
(First Magazine Publication)

SHERIFF ON THE SPOT.....By Peter Field 10

Pat Stevens was just about to hang up his unwanted lawman's badge, with a deep sigh of relief, when he ran into evidence that his successor was crooked. Then he found himself plunged into a murder and bank robbery, wherein the chief suspects were Sam Sloan and One-Eyed Ezra, Pat's two best friends!

SHORT STORIES

THESE GUNS SPEAK FOR ME.....By Lee Floren 67

"This is your old home town, Porter but it's no different from any other town you've been called to clean up. You're a ruthless killer, hombre, and nobody wants you around, even if you are with the law!"

OWLHOOT TRAIL FOR A NESTER.....By William P. Brothers 77

Tom Ashburn paid in killing toil for the mistakes of his past, then range war came to wipe out his little stake, and a gloating polecat whispered: "Will you ride with me tonight, or shall I tell this town what you did in Montana?"

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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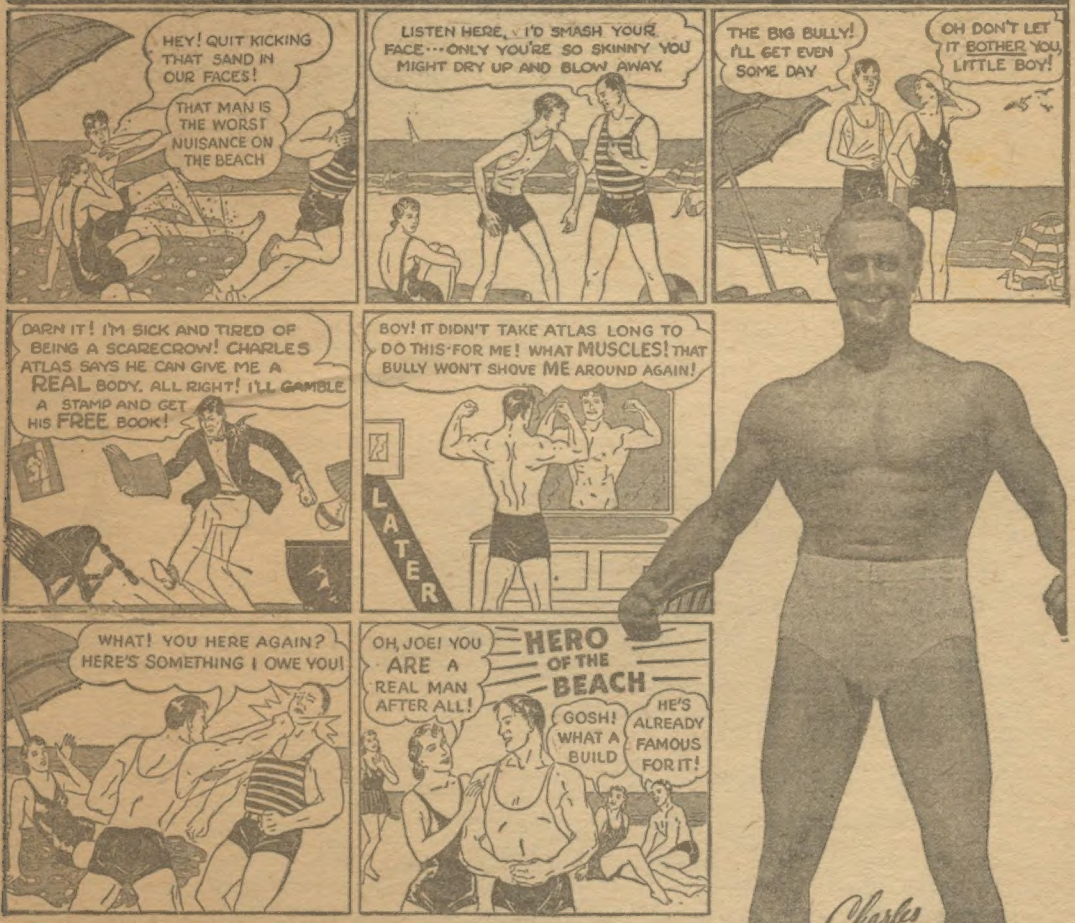
HOW JOE'S BODY BROUGHT HIM FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME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THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU, LITTLE BOY!
DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!
BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! WHAT MUSCLES! THAT BULLY WON'T SHOVE ME AROUND AGAIN!
LATER
WHAT! YOU HERE AGAIN? HERE'S SOMETHING I OWE YOU!
OH, JOE! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!
HERO OF THE BEACH
GOSH! WHAT A BUILD
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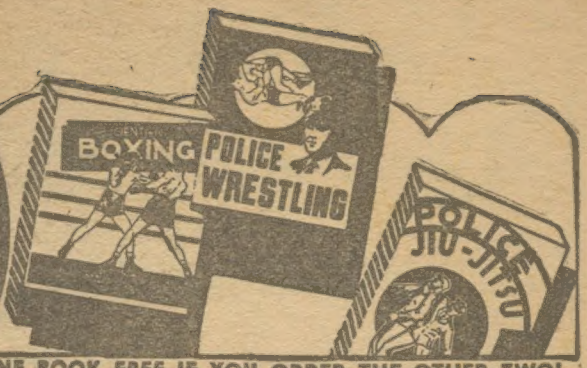

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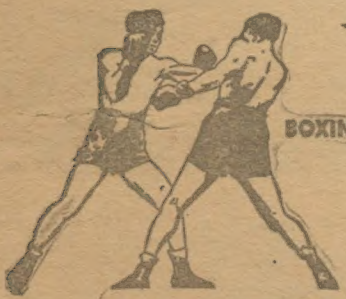

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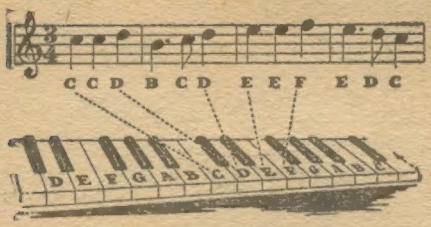
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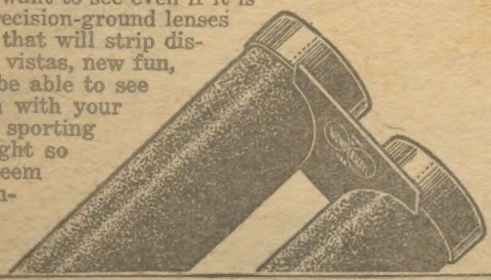

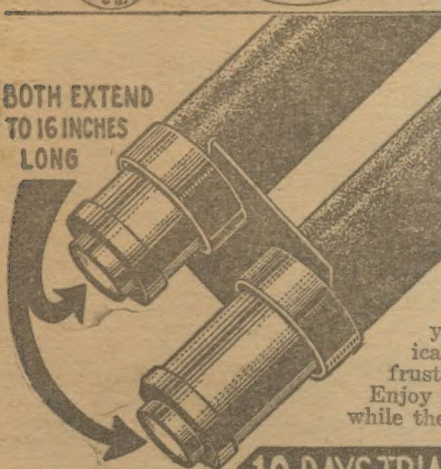

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Here is Another Swift-Moving Powder Valley Novel By

PETER FIELD

Pat fired rapidly into the air.

SHERIFF ON THE SPOT

Featuring Pat Stevens, Sam Sloan, and One-Eyed Ezra

Ezra was as surprised as the Sheriff.

Pat Stevens was just about to resign as Sheriff of Powder Valley, when a murder and bank robbery sent him hot on the trail of—Sam and Ezra, his two best friends!

CHAPTER I

A KEROSENE lantern hung from a nail in the wall and lighted the interior of the small lean-to at the rear of the adobe jail in Dutch Springs. The lean-to

contained a canvas cot, an old rocking chair and a small wooden table that served as a desk. In Dutch Springs, and throughout Powder Valley, the lean-to was known as the "Sheriff's Office."

Tonight, a roll of bedding, neatly wrapped in a tarpaulin and tied with a short length of rope, lay on the canvas cot. The top of the table was clean and the wooden floor had been meticulously swept. Pat Stevens stood in the center of the floor and let his gray eyes brood around the cramped interior, checking everything to make sure he was leaving nothing behind.

For Pat was bowing out as sheriff of Powder Valley. He was turning over the keys to the jail, the lean-to office, and his badge to his successor.

And that reminded Pat of something. He reached up and slowly unpinned the badge from his gray flannel shirt. The yellow light from the lantern gleamed on it brightly as he held it in his hand. He laid the badge on top of the table and sighed.

He grinned at himself ruefully for that sigh. A man would think he was sorry to give the badge up. Nothing could be further from the truth. He hadn't wanted to be sheriff in the first place. The job had been thrust upon him after Ed Grimes' murder. Someone had to take hold and see that law and order in the Valley were maintained. The choice had naturally fallen on him because of his past reputation.

With his two gun-partners, Sam Sloan and Ezra, as deputies, he hadn't made Powder Valley a bad sheriff. But he was glad enough to give the badge up. He wondered why Jeth Purdue didn't come along, and he settled himself impatiently in the rocking chair to wait for him. Jeth had promised to come in that afternoon to take over the office. Now, it was early night and Jeth hadn't showed up.

Through an open window behind him, Pat Stevens could hear the evening stage coming down Main Street at a gallop, could hear the shouts and the jangling of harness as it slowed for a brief stop in Dutch Springs before continuing on southward.

It was funny that Jeth Purdue didn't come. He'd been anxious enough to get the job Pat was glad to give up. Of course, it wasn't really legal, turning the office over to him tonight. Jeth wouldn't be officially sworn in as sheriff until the next day. But then, his appointment maybe wasn't exactly legal either. None of the local citizens knew what the correct procedure was when a sheriff resigned. It had looked like a lot of time and trouble to hold another election. So a group of representative men had gotten together and talked it over and decided on Jeth Purdue. Powder Valley had its own way of simplifying legal matters, and it generally worked out all right.

Pat hoped Jeth Purdue was the right man to take over. He rather liked Jeth, though the incoming sheriff was rather new to the Valley, having settled on a ranch south of town only about six months previously. Still, Pat thought that might be a good thing for a sheriff. Might be better to have a sheriff not too intimately acquainted with folks. He'd have a better chance to be impartial and run the office as it should be run.

The way Powder Valley was growing up and getting civilized, it was time the sheriff's office was put on a strictly business basis.

PAT turned his head and listened to the cracking whip and the clatter of wheels as the stagecoach pulled out. Dutch Springs was getting to be a real hub of transportation with a daily coach each direction and being selected as a station point on the new Pony Express line that would soon be bringing mail up the southern route to connect with the East-West line north of Denver.

That would be a mighty fine thing for the Valley; bring Dutch Springs into close contact with the outside world. And it was going to be a mighty fine thing for Ezra and Sam Sloan, too, with them getting the contract to run the local Pony Express station.

As a mail-rider, small, wiry Sam Sloan would certainly be one of the most competent and trustworthy men in the service, and Ezra was a mighty fine hand with horses.

It was the sort of work they needed to quiet them down and keep them out of trouble. Ever since they'd upped and sold their Powder Valley ranch at auction and gone traipsing off on that crazy adventure to Corpse's Corner, Pat Stevens had been worried about the pair. He'd helped them get their eight thousand dollars back after losing it in a crooked poker game, and had been able to argue them into returning to the Valley with him, but both of them had refused to go back into ranching.

With all that cash money, they'd been living like a couple of bank presidents up at the Jewel Hotel, drinking too much and paying too much attention to pretty Kitty Lane who entertained in the Jewel Saloon and presided over the dining room.

That is, Sam Sloan was hopelessly smitten with Kitty. Ezra, with his scarred face and one eye, his huge, ungainly body, had always left women strictly alone. But Sam was making a plumb fool out of himself, according to what Pat's friends told him.

Pat wasn't so sure. Kitty Lane was mighty pretty, and the men did say that she wasn't one for foolishness. Oh, she'd sing to a man, and flirt while he danced with her, and let him buy her a drink now and then, but she didn't let it go any further. At least, that was the story told by men who had tried.

Pat hadn't been seeing much of Sam and Ezra while he was sheriff. They deeply resented the badge he wore, and that was one reason why he'd be glad to turn it over to Jeth Purdue. He wondered again why Jeth didn't come along, and he got up to step to the window and peer out toward the village.

Brisk footsteps coming up the plank walk to the office brought Pat Stevens' head around slowly. He blinked at the man who stopped in the doorway and peered inside.

The stranger was dressed in dudish city clothes—a stiff straw hat, neat gray suit, and cloth-top, buttoned shoes with very sharp toes. He wore a celluloid collar and a tie with a big, gold horseshoe stickpin, and he carried a pair of fawn-colored gloves in his left hand. He was a slender man, with dark pouches under a pair of coldly cruel eyes, and he wore a neatly-clipped black mustache. When he parted his thin lips to address Pat, three gold teeth glittered in the yellow lamplight.

He studied Pat with his head cocked slightly on one side, and said, "So, you're the sheriff of this here Powder Valley?"

His words seemed to carry a covert sneer with them. Pat said, "Howdy," and let it go at that.

THE stranger stepped inside and glanced around the lean-to. "Just moving in, eh? Well, it's time. I've waited long enough for you fellows to get rid of that other sheriff.

"You know who I am, of course," he went on impatiently when Pat didn't say anything.

Pat cleared his throat and admitted, "I'm not rightly sure that I do."

"I'm Ralston. Fred Ralston. Just pulled in from Denver on the coach. I thought I'd drop by here and see for sure that we had the right sheriff in office before I go on up to the Jewel. Kitty wrote me that Deems had it all fixed up with you. You know exactly what you're to do?"

Pat said mildly, "Mr. Deems don't generally make any mistakes, does he?"

"Not him," Fred Ralston chuckled. He glanced down at the silver badge lying on the table. "Don't forget to pin that on when you come over. We've got to make this look plenty legal."

Pat said grimly, "I'll be wearing it."

The man from Denver unbuttoned his coat and dragged a heavy watch out of a waistcoat pocket by means of a gold chain. He snapped it open and said, "Give me half an hour. The less I'm seen around town, the better these affairs always go."

Pat said, "You sound like this is old stuff to you."

"Sure." Ralston chuckled and put his watch back. "Kitty and I've worked plenty before. Don't you worry. She'll have things fixed just right. She tells me she's hooked a real fish this time. Eight thousand simoleons in hard cash—he and his partner together." Ralston smacked his lips over the words.

Pat Stevens' mind was working desperately, trying to think of things to say that would keep the city man talking without revealing to him that he wasn't Jeth Purdue. The only two men in Dutch Springs with eight thousand dollars were Sam Sloan and Ezra. He knew they must be the pair Ralston referred to. But, what did he mean by saying Kitty had hooked them? None of the conversation made any sense. He cautiously tried to steer it around to something concrete that would dispel the mystery:

"You reckon he's not going to make any trouble? Him an' his partner?"

"Trouble?" Ralston laughed scornfully. "Not if you do your part."

Pat got out a red bandanna and mopped sweat from his bronzed forehead, though a cool breeze swept in over him from the open window. He mumbled, "I ain't sure that I rightly know my part."

"Nonsense," Ralston said briskly. "Do exactly as Deems has told you. Now, I'd better be getting over there before they wonder what's become of me." He nodded briskly and walked out.

Pat Stevens stood unhappily by the window and wondered what it was all about. Joe Deems was proprietor of the Jewel Hotel. A saturnine man who had recently come to Dutch Springs and taken over the old run-down hotel. With Kitty Lane to act as a magnet for the ranchers and punchers of the Valley, the old hostelry had come to life in a surprising manner under Deems' expert handling. Grizzled family men who'd never spent a night away from home in their lives suddenly found reasons for spending the night in Dutch Springs, and the younger cowhands crowded there enthusiastically every night for the chance to dance with Kitty to the music of an accordion and untuned piano.

But, how did all that affect Sam Sloan and the eight thousand dollars he and Ezra had gotten from the sale of their ranch? Pat was a simple man, with no experience at unraveling mysteries. He and Ezra and Sam had done more than their share to unmask lawlessness in the West, but always it had been a direct matter to be settled with blazing six-guns.

He didn't know anything about the ways of city slickers, he told himself morosely. He was certain that Fred Ralston had something up his sleeve, but he sure didn't know how to go about shaking it out into plain sight. It was evident, though, that the plan required the help of a sheriff, and that the conspirators had been waiting for the time when Pat would step down and turn his badge over to Jeth Purdue.

SLOW anger began to burn inside Pat at the thought. Purdue had fooled him all right. Just as he had fooled all the other honest citizens of the Valley. Planning some sort of devilment his first night as sheriff, with Joe Deems, Kitty Lane and a stranger from Denver.

The hoofbeats of a galloping horse came through the open window from the road leading south from Dutch Springs. The galloping was labored, as if of a horse straining to keep up the pace, spurred on by a relentless rider.

Pat frowned and listened intently, heard the horse swerve away from Main street toward the small adobe jail and lean-to.

He stiffened and turned from the window as the animal plowed to a stop outside. He heard the thud of hard bootheels on the planks outside, the jingle of spurs.

Jeth Purdue came panting into the office, his thin red face tight with worry. He was a tall man, with a greyhound leanness of frame. He wore a single gun-belt carrying a .45, and big-roweled Spanish spurs on

his run-down boots. His face showed relief at sight of Pat Stevens.

"I was afraid you'd get tired of waitin'," he panted. "Got hung up out to the ranch. Two of my best dang cows bogged in Clay Creek. Then when I got started, damned if my hawse didn't put his foot in a prairie dawg hole an' I had to shoot him an' go back to rope me out another." He paused to catch his breath and then ducked his head to step inside the lean-to.

Pat asked, "What was all the hurry about?"

"You said as how you wanted me to take over tonight an' you'd be clearin' out. I didn't want you to get tired waitin' for me an' leave town." Jeth glanced around the office. His gaze stopped at the badge on the table, clung there as though its silver-brightness hypnotized him.

Pat said, "Looks like you're mighty anxious to start bein' sheriff."

"'Tain't that," Purdue protested. "Just didn't want to be late." He paused, then asked with an elaborate [illegible] concern, "Evenin' stage come yet?"

"Come an' gone."

There was a little moment of silence in the small lean-to. Pat stood on flat feet with his arms folded across his chest, little wrinkles about the outer corners of his eyes as he studied the face of the man who had been selected to succeed him as sheriff.

Jeth Purdue shifted his weight from his right foot to his left. He glanced at Pat's impassive face and said uncertainly, "Well, looks like you're packed up an' all. Nothin' much left to do but this, I reckon." He took a step forward and reached down toward the badge of office.

Pat said, "Wait a minute, Purdue." He spoke in a slow drawl, but with enough weight to cause Purdue to jerk back his hand and look up apprehensively.

"What do you know about a feller named Fred Ralston?"

Purdue wet his lips. "I didn't catch the name."

"From Denver," Pat went on evenly.

Fear leaped into Purdue's eyes. He lowered them swiftly and muttered, "Dunno what you're talkin' about."

"What've you got planned with Joe Deems an' Kitty Lane, an' this Ralston hombre?"

Jeth Purdue began to shake his head from side to side. "I shore dunno what you're drivin' at."

Pat said angrily, "Start talkin', Purdue. An' talk fast. Ralston came in on that stage tonight."

Jeth Purdue took a backward step. A yellowish gleam flickered from beneath his lowered eyelids. His right hand started stealthily downward toward the butt of his holstered gun.

Pat Stevens warned, "Don't try it, Jeth." His arms were still folded.

Purdue's gun-hand went downward fast.

Pat lunged forward and drove his fist against the point of the lean man's jaw. Jeth toppled backward off balance, desperately dragging his gun clear of leather.

PAT laughed savagely and pulled his own gun free, swung it downward in a sharp arc that smashed the heavy barrel against Purdue's wrist.

Jeth sobbed with pain and his .45 clattered to the floor. He shrank back in abject fear as Pat towered over him. "Talk, you skunk," Pat ordered through tight-set teeth. "Give it to me before I start gun-whippin' you right."

Jeth whined, "I dunno nothin'. As God's my judge, Pat, I dunno what you're jumpin' me for."

"You lie," snarled Pat. "It's something about Sam an' Ezra."

Jeth Purdue moaned, "You've busted my wrist sure's hell." He caught hold of it with his left hand and cried out sharply with the pain of it. His face took on a queer pallor and he sank down limply to the floor, lay there with closed eyes.

Pat stood over and cursed him, but he did not move. Pat hesitated, then shrugged and reholstered his gun. He stooped and got his hands underneath Purdue's shoulders, dragged him over the threshold and around to

the open door of the empty adobe jail.

He pushed him onto the floor and let him lie there in a limp heap, closed the barred door and padlocked it securely.

He strode back into the lean-to and kicked Jeth's gun into a corner, picked up the silver badge and dropped it into a shirt pocket. He turned down the lantern and gave it a quick shake to put it out, then went out and closed the door behind him. He figured it had been just about half an hour since Fred Ralstons' visit as he started toward the Jewel Hotel.

CHAPTER II

PAT STEVENS had to traverse the entire single block of Main Street from the village square to reach the Jewel Hotel at the other end. There weren't many saddled horses at the hitchracks along the way. Half a dozen of the old-timers had remained loyal to the Gold Eagle Saloon, and their horses were tied outside, but nine-tenths of the other riders in town were congregated at the Jewel.

A lop-sided yellow moon faced Pat in the east as he strode along the boardwalk past the almost deserted business houses and restaurants. There was already the sharp tang of autumn in the night air in that portion of the southern part of Colorado lying eastward from the Rockies, and Pat drew in great draughts of the clean, cool air in an effort to clear the confusion from his mind as he strode forward.

The night air didn't have the usual effect on his mind. He was a simple man, accustomed to simple situations and direct answers. His way of meeting almost any emergency was by straightforward action. He felt, now, that he should have taken Fred Ralston by the throat back there in the lean-to, and choked an explanation out of him. He didn't quite know why he had restrained himself from doing that.

Instead, he had let Ralston go away thinking he had talked to Jeth Purdue. By that action, he had invited the continuance of whatever sinister plot Ralston, Deems and Kitty Lane were involved in together.

Looking at it that way, Pat realized he'd be responsible for anything that had happened or might happen at the Jewel Hotel. He could have stopped it merely by letting Ralston know that Jeth Purdue had not yet assumed office. Instead of that, he'd had to play smart and encourage them to go on with their plan. Pat's lips twisted in a mirthless smile as he thought it out that way. He was acting, by golly, like a smart city detective instead of a simple western sheriff. Like he wanted something to happen so he could look smart by solving it the way detectives always did in storybooks.

His pace increased and he became more and more uneasy as he approached closer to the hotel. Twenty-five or thirty saddled horses stood outside, and bright light and music streamed out of the swinging doors and wide plate-glass windows of a large, ground-level room beyond the entrance into the hotel lobby.

Some of Pat Stevens' uneasiness evaporated as he shouldered the swinging doors aside and stepped into the saloon. The bar was crowded with laughing men, and half a dozen were grouped around the accordion and tinny piano at the end of the room singing a popular song of the day in loud disharmony.

Certainly, he thought, nothing very serious had happened here as yet. It gave him a sort of foolish feeling to walk into this scene of gaiety and good fellowship when he had been fearing something else.

He tipped his Stetson back on his head, hooked his thumbs in his gunbelts and looked around for Fred Ralston or Kitty Lane. Neither of them were in the saloon adjunct to the hotel. Neither did he see either Sam Sloan or one-eyed Ezra about. But as he stood there in the doorway, Joe Deems detached himself from the group at the bar and came toward him with a hearty greeting:

"Well, well. If it's not Patrick Stevens. Going to loosen up and

celebrate now that you've got rid of that badge, Pat?"

Pat said, "I'm looking for Sam Sloan."

"He'll probably be around." Deems put his hand on Pat's arm and urged him toward the bar. "Have a drink on me—now that you're not a sheriff any more."

Joe Deems was about Pat's height, with a deceptive slimness of figure that hid a lot of substantial weight. He was about thirty-five, though his thinning sandy hair made him look older. His face and voice had a surface appearance of geniality, though it couldn't wholly hide the intrinsic hardness of the man underneath. His forehead sloped back sharply from ragged eyebrows, and he had a sharp nose that had at one time been knocked awry. It had grown back almost straight, but enough one-sided to give his face a curious appearance of unevenness. He had long white hands and a way of gesturing nervously with them, and he wore a green-striped shirt with red suspenders holding up tight-legged pants of black broadcloth, and red elastic arm-bands on the sleeves of his shirt.

Pat let himself be led to the bar by the proprietor, but said quietly, "I'll buy my own drink, Deems. An' drink it alone."

Deems let go of his arm with a pained look. "That's not being very friendly, Stevens."

PAT said, "I didn't mean it to be." He turned away from Deems and said curtly to the bartender, "Green Valley."

Joe Deems stayed by his side. He cleared his throat as the bartender set out a shot-glass and poured bonded bourbon into it. "I thought the reason you'd stayed away from my place was because you were sheriff and felt you shouldn't do much drinking in public."

Pat downed his drink without saying anything.

Deems laughed uncertainly. "But I thought things would be different after you turned your badge over to Jeth Purdue."

Pat set his empty glass down and spun a silver half dollar across the counter. He said, "You do a lot of thinking, don't you, Deems?" and turned, brushing past the proprietor toward a side door leading into the small hotel lobby.

There was a leather-covered sofa and four straight chairs in the lobby. A wizened little man leaned on the counter over an open hotel register, blinking rheumy eyes at the brightly lighted saloon. He showed some yellow snags of teeth in a smile when Pat came through the doorway. "Fust time I've seed you around here, Pat."

Pat said, "Evenin', Forrey." He came to the counter and leaned one elbow on it, looked down at the open register while he got out the makings.

"Reckon you jest couldn't make out to stay away no longer." The aged clerk chuckled gleefully. "That Kitty Lane brings 'em all in sooner or later. But you'll hafta cut out Sammy Sloan if you git anywheres with Kitty." His cackle of merriment had an obscene sound.

Leaning over the counter, Pat was reading the last name written on the register. In heavy, bold letters was written, "F. A. Ralston, Denver, Colo." The number of the room assigned to Ralston was scratched so thinly that Pat couldn't make it out. He put the blunt tip of his finger on the name and asked, "What room has he got?"

Tom Forrest peered down at Pat's fingertip. "That dude feller from Denver? Number fifteen. I recollect he ast fer it particular."

"Is he in his room now?"

"I reckon. He went up an' I never seed him come down."

"What room have Sam and Ezra got?"

"They got two rooms." The clerk chuckled happily. "Yes sirree. One room fer each of 'em. Livin' in style since they sold out their ranch an' moved into town."

"What are their room numbers?" Pat asked sharply.

"Eighteen an' twenty. Right straight back from the head of the

stairs. I dunno whether you'll find 'em there or not."

Pat said, "I'll see."

When he turned away he became aware that Joe Deems had come up silently behind him while he stood at the counter. The hotel proprietor had light brown eyes which looked yellowish now as they met Pat's. Deems stood between Pat and the foot of the stairway leading up to the hotel rooms. He stood there with his arms folded and asked the clerk, "What did Stevens want?"

"He ast me what room Ezra an' Sam Sloan was in."

Joe Deems' lips came back from his teeth. "Didn't he ask you something else?"

"Well, now I do recollect—"

Pat took a step forward, his eyes blazing. "Why don't you ask me, Deems?"

"All right. I will. What are you snooping around for?"

Pat Stevens drew in a deep breath. His hands were bunched into big fists by his sides. He said, "I'm going up."

"No, you're not." Deems stepped backward, up to the second stair, the yellowish glint becoming more pronounced in his eyes.

Pat controlled himself and asked, "Why not?" in the tone of a reasonable man who wants an answer.

"Because I say you're not. This is my hotel."

"It's a public place," Pat told him gently.

"I own it."

Pat took a step forward. His voice remained gentle but it had a steely firmness. "You'll get hurt 'less you get out of the way, Deems."

Deems snarled, "Not me." He unfolded his arms and showed Pat a stubby, double-barreled derringer in his right hand. It was no larger than a woman's fist, yet a lethal weapon of large caliber. Deems warned in a thin voice, "Don't force me to use this in protection of my property, Stevens."

PAT put one hand on the newel post and grinned up at the proprietor. "This is a funny way to treat a sheriff."

"You forget you're not the sheriff any longer."

Pat slowly reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt and drew out his silver sheriff's badge. He showed it to Deems in the palm of his hand. "What does this look like?"

Deems paled and bit his under lip. "But—I thought Jeth Purdue—"

Pat shrugged and replaced the badge in his pocket. "Changed your mind about me comin' up?"

"No." The derringer still threatened Pat. "Sam and Ezra aren't in their rooms. If you'll wait in the barroom I'll have them located for you."

Pat's lunging body drove forward, and his left arm shot out to encircle Deems' legs. He straightened up swiftly and the proprietor's head went back, hitting a stair-step loudly. His body went limp and the tiny pistol clattered down at Pat's feet. Pat tossed Deems aside on the floor and picked up the derringer, said curtly over his shoulder, "Throw some water on him, Forrey," and went up the uncarpeted stairs two at a time.

There was a wide hall at the top, with closed doors on each side. Pat strode down the hall and stopped in front of the door numbered 18. He knocked on it loudly, but got no response. He moved to the next door on the same side, number 20, and knocked on it with the same negative result. He tried both doors and found them securely locked.

He swung about and went across the hall to number 15. He got no answer when he knocked on it, either.

He hesitated for a moment, his face grim and his eyes narrowed, glanced up and down the hall, but all the doors remained tightly closed.

He turned the knob of number 15, and was surprised to have the door swing open.

It was dark inside. He struck a match and went across to the washstand to put fire to the wick of a kerosene lamp, turned to survey the

small hotel bedroom in the yellow light.

A suitcase lay open on the bed. Fred Ralston's straw hat lay beside it. The room showed no other sign of occupancy. Pat grunted his disgust and turned to blow the lamp out. In the darkness, his gaze was attracted by a thin slit of light showing along the base of the wall on the right.

He stepped to it and investigated, found it was coming beneath a door leading into another room. He put his ear against the thin panel and listened, but could hear nothing from the adjoining room.

A tentative rapping on the door brought no response. Again, he tried the doorknob, and felt it turn under his hand. He eased the door open with his right hand on the butt of his holstered gun.

He saw a frilly bedspread, and there were creamy lace curtains at the window of the lighted room. A lady's dress was draped over the foot of the bed.

Pat pulled the door open wider, waiting apprehensively for a scream of fright that would tell him it was occupied.

Then he saw the man's body lying in the middle of the floor. The crumpled body of Fred Ralston lying face downward with the bone handle of a hunting knife sticking up between his shoulder blades.

Pat hurried forward and dropped to his knees beside the corpse of the man from Denver. Ralston was quite dead. And Pat recognized the hunting knife that had been driven deep into his back. He stared at the initials carved into the bone handle. S. S. It was Sam Sloan's hunting knife.

CHAPTER III

PAT STEVENS knelt there a long time looking down at the murdered man without moving. In his turbulent past he had seen much violent death, had stood looking down at many murdered men, but he'd never been made sick by the sight before. Never before had he been forced to endure the sight of a knife belonging to his best friend protruding from the back of a corpse.

Far stronger than any other emotion as he stood there was the helpless feeling that he could have prevented this tragedy half an hour ago. Though it seemed inconceivable that Fred Ralston could have known this was waiting for him at the Jewel Hotel, it was also just as apparent to Pat that his death was, somehow, the result of the mysterious plan that had brought him to Powder Valley from Denver. A plan that required the services of a new sheriff, and which Pat could have stopped simply by declaring himself to Ralston in the lean-to office.

Pat drew in a deep breath and jerked his thoughts back to the present and pressing emergency.

Here was a dead man, and there was Sam Sloan's knife sticking in his back. If Sam had wielded that knife, Pat knew the smaller man had had a good reason for striking. But, why wasn't Sam here to take the consequences of his act? Why was Ralston lying here alone in a hotel room in a pool of his own blood?

Pat drove himself swiftly into action as various possible answers to the questions came to him. He hurried to the hall door of the death room and tried the knob. The door was locked.

He went back into Ralston's room, closed the door gently and found a key on the inside of the door. He turned the key and went back into the adjoining room.

Obviously, a woman's bedroom. There were several glittering gowns hung in one corner behind a curtain, and there were dainty, feminine toilet articles neatly laid out on top of the bureau.

A framed picture on the bureau caught Pat's attention. Though he had seen Kitty Lane only once, he knew it was a photograph of the hotel hostess.

There was no evidence of any struggle in the room. Two rocking chairs stood close together near the curtained window, with a small table between them. There was a tray and

a bottle of whisky and two glasses on the low table. The bottle was less than half full. Around the edge of the tray were burned-out butts of brown-paper cigarettes. Sam always rolled his smokes with brown paper. And the cigarettes were smoked down very short as he always smoked his.

Pat Stevens moved around the room slowly. He pretended he was looking for a clue, though inwardly he admitted he wouldn't recognize a murder clue if one rose up on its hind legs and snapped at him.

Besides, what did he need with a clue? The whole story of the murder was told in that hunting knife. All he had to do was find Sam and arrest him.

Thinking of that put a sour taste in Pat's mouth. There was still plenty of killing in the west. Powder Valley hadn't got so civilized that men didn't fight and die occasionally, and there was no thought of arrest.

But a knife in the back was a different matter. And, right here in a lady's bedroom!

Pat stopped his aimless wandering to stoop over the corpse and stare down at it broodingly. Ralston lay belly downward on his left side. His right leg was drawn up, and his right arm was outflung. His eyes were closed and he looked completely at peace.

Pat knew what he had to do long before he did it. He stood there, pretending he was trying to make up his mind, trying to justify himself, while all the time he knew he was going to hide that damning evidence against his best friend.

He stooped and gingerly took hold of the initialed bone handle of the slender-bladed knife.

It didn't come loose when he pulled at it. It was as though the lifeless clay of Fred Ralston resented his effort to dislodge the death weapon, as though the dead man were determined it should stay there as mute evidence against Sam Sloan.

Pat got a tighter hold and wiggled the knife back and forth. The dead flesh released its hold reluctantly. It came out suddenly.

Pat held it away from him and let the blood drip on the floor, then carried it over to the wash stand and wrapped the knife in a thin hotel towel. He lifted his pants leg and dropped the wrapped knife down inside his boot, then shook the cloth down again.

He went back into Ralston's room and closed the door behind him, felt his way to the hall door in the darkness, and unlocked it.

He took the key out, and after he'd gone through the door and closed it, he locked the door on the outside and dropped the key into a pocket of his short leather vest together with the derringer he had taken from Joe Deems.

The doors along the hall were still closed. As far as he knew, no one had seen him go in or out of the Denver man's room. He didn't think he'd been more than ten minutes altogether.

He got out his bandanna and mopped his face as he went back to the stairs. The wizened clerk leaned on his counter and gave Pat a toothless grin as he came down. "Was Sam an' Ezra in their rooms?"

Pat shook his head. He stopped in front of the counter. "When did you see them last, Forrey?"

"Little after dark, I reckon. Ezra went up to his room fust—then Sammy went up." Tom Forrest snickered. "Sammy was taking three steps on every stair—with a mighty purty lady he'pin' him along."

"Kitty?"

"Tha's right. Seems like Kitty shore does cotton to that measly little pardner of yourn, Pat."

"Has she come down since then?"

"Nope. Not by the front stairs, leastways. Mighta used the back, though. She does a lot."

Pat turned around and looked on the floor where he had last seen the hotel proprietor.

"Where's Deems?"

Tom Forrest chuckled loudly. "They come an' carted him off for repairs. Mighty nigh cracked the back of his head, I reckon, when you jerked him down. Why was he so dead set on keepin' you from goin' up to see Sam, Pat?"

"That," Pat Stevens said, "is something I want to ask Deems." He lifted his head and stared through the glass door leading into the saloon.

Noticing his look, the clerk nodded. "Yep. Tha's her all right. Mighty purty singin', if you ast me. I guess she *did* come down from upstairs by the back way."

Pat nodded and went toward the glass door through which he could faintly hear a clear soprano voice singing *Annie Laurie.*

WHEN he opened the door, Kitty Lane's limpidly beautiful tones came out clearly. She stood on a little dais at the end of the room, accompanied by an accordion played by a pallid-faced youth with the limp butt of a cigar drooping from his lips.

Pat stopped in the doorway and looked at the singer. Kitty Lane was no longer young, but she was still beautiful. Her body had lost the slimness of youth, but was softly rounded and swelled the bodice and hips [illegible] long, tight, shimmering dress of [illegible] material that swept down to her feet. Her cheeks were delicately rouged and her lips were quite red, yet she managed to wear the artificial coloring without being really conspicuous. Her gown was cut quite low in front, showing a smooth neck and creamy-white shoulders and the beginning curve of a full bosom, yet it did not appear immodest on Kitty Lane. Her hair was the color of ripe wheat, coiled about her small head in a heavy braid, and she wore long, red earrings which hung almost to her bare shoulders.

Her gaze caught Pat's as she started on the last chorus of her song, and he thought she gave a little start of recognition but her tone did not falter.

He stood watching her gravely until she finished singing, but she did not look at him again.

Men crowded around her as she stepped down from the dais, applauding loudly and calling for more. But she brushed past them, smiling and gay, and came across the saloon toward Pat.

He took off his hat, walking forward slowly to meet her. Kitty curved her red lips upward in a gay smile as they met in the center of the saloon. "It *is* the sheriff, isn't it?" She clasped her hands in front of her and demurely lowered her eyes. "I've wondered whether I was ever going to get a chance to meet you."

Pat said, "I've missed a lot by not coming around sooner."

She flirted her eyelids up at him, then laughed and took his arm. "I know you're a married man, Sheriff Stevens, but I hope that won't keep you from buying me a drink."

He said, "It sure won't, Ma'am," and went with her to a secluded table in the rear corner where he drew out a chair for her and then took the one opposite.

Kitty Lane rested her bare elbows on the table and cupped her pointed chin in her palms. Her eyes were a clear deep blue, like the waters of a mountain lake high in the Rockies. "Maybe I shouldn't be calling you sheriff," she said. "You're not wearing your badge tonight."

Pat said, "No. I'm not." He reached in his pocket for cigarette papers and tobacco.

A waiter came to the table and Pat asked, "What'll you have, Ma'am?"

She said, "Bourbon, please," and Pat told the waiter, "Twice."

When the man had gone Kitty asked, "What is the name of the man who is sheriff in your place? Someone pointed him out the other night and he's not nearly as handsome as you."

Pat felt his face getting hot. He wasn't used to having pretty women tell him he was handsome. He wondered if she told Sam Sloan that. He said, "You mean Jeth Purdue?"

She nodded and said, "I guess so," as though it didn't matter. She held out her hand as he finished licking his cigarette. "May I roll one?"

Pat gave her his makings. He vaguely wondered why he wasn't shocked as he watched her slim fingers deftly roll a cigarette. Somehow, Kitty Lane didn't seem at all wild, even though she wore rouge and a low-necked dress, smoked

cigarettes and drank whisky with a man.

He brought his thoughts back to the dead man upstairs in her room and asked, "Seen Sam lately?"

She was absorbed in her cigarette and didn't look up. "About an hour ago, I guess." Her fingers tore the flimsy paper. She made a grimace and started to roll another.

"Whereabouts?"

THIS time she did look up. The blue of her eyes was deeper, now. Almost violet. "Upstairs." She hesitated. Her voice softened. "I helped him to his room."

Pat asked curtly, "Drunk?"

"A little bit." She licked her cigarette.

"He's drinkin' a lot these days, isn't he?"

"Too much." Kitty Lane's voice was suddenly tired. She leaned forward with the tightly rolled cigarette between her lips to get a light from his. Her eyes held his as the tips of their cigarettes touched.

She drew back, drawing in a deep breath and expelling a cloud of blue smoke through her crimsoned lips. "You could talk to him, Pat. He'd listen to you." She put her hand on his arm. "You don't mind if I call you Pat?"

Pat said, "No." The waiter came with their drinks.

"I want to talk to him," Pat told her roughly. "He's not in his room. You know where he is?"

She shrank back from his tone, shook her head slowly while she looked down at her cigarette. "Isn't he in his room?"

"If he is, he's locked in an' passed out," Pat grated. "How many drinks did he have in your room after you went upstairs together?" he added brutally.

The color fled from Kitty's cheeks, leaving two round spots of rouge. "Do you think I drink with men in my bedroom?"

"Don't you?"

"No." She stamped her foot down on the floor. "You men are all alike. Just because a girl works in a saloon, you think she's a—a—"

Pat said harshly, "What's Fred Ralston to you."

Kitty Lane pushed back her chair and stood up. She leaned forward and slapped Pat, leaving the print of her fingers on his face, sobbing loudly, "Damn you. That's for your insult."

Half the men in the saloon had been watching interestedly ever since Pat and Kitty had gone over to the table together.

Now, there was a concerted movement forward, and a low muttering as they drew their own interpretation of Kitty's action.

One youth pushed forward from the rest as Kitty whirled away from the table with her head held high. He was Dan Peters, young enough to be Pat's son, with a cow-lick and with the soft down of an unrazored beard on his cheeks. He wore high-heeled Spanish boots, and had a shiny gun-belt strapped tightly about his young waist. He had enough liquor in him to make him foolish, and he was callowly in love with Kitty Lane.

"Whass he doin', Miss K[illegible] muttered thickly. He swayed a little on his high heels as he tried to strut forward.

Kitty sobbed, "Oh, Dan! He said the most awful things to me. Make him stop."

"You bet I will, Miss Kitty," the young puncher promised drunkenly. He faced Pat and his voice cracked in an embarrassing falsetto as he demanded, "Git up on your hind laigs, Pat Stevens, an' crave the lady's pardon."

Pat gave a snort of disgust and glared at the boy. "Go blow your nose, Dan, an' keep it out of menfolk's business."

Someone at the bar snickered loudly. The sound infuriated Dan, drove the last semblance of sober sense from his mind. He slapped his hand down to the butt of his six-gun and tugged at it awkwardly.

Pat kicked his chair back and started toward him. "Don't be a fool, Dan. Let go of that gun."

Dan got a thin sneer on his lips and began to curse Pat. His gun

came loose unexpectedly and he triggered it as it came up waveringly.

A bullet tore into the floor three feet to Pat's right and ten feet behind him. He lunged forward and got hold of Dan's gun, gave him a shove back into the crowd and ordered calmly, "If he's got any friends here you'd better take him out and sober him up." He broke the gun and threw the cartridges out, then tossed the empty weapon at Dan Peters' feet.

He strode to Kitty Lane's side and took her arm firmly. "We're goin' upstairs to your room."

CHAPTER IV

KITTY pulled back from him, her violet-blue eyes flashing dangerously. "You've got your nerve, Pat Stevens."

He kept hold of her bare arm and repeated stolidly, "We're goin' upstairs to your room."

Her red lips curled away from her teeth contemptuously. "And some people in this town think you're a gentleman."

Pat laughed shortly and started pulling her toward the door leading into the lobby. "Bein' sheriff and gentleman don't work so good together sometimes."

She hung back, turned her head to call vibrantly to the crowd of admirers behind her, "Isn't there a real man in the bunch? Are you going to let this—this ex-sheriff—treat me like a she-dog right in front of you?"

Most of the men at the bar knew Pat Stevens intimately; all of them knew his gun-slinging reputation. She got some low growls in response to her plea; there was a slow movement forward, but no man was eager to push forward in front of the rest to make a try at stopping Pat.

He laughed deep in his throat and kept relentlessly moving her toward the door. "You'd best shut your mouth an' come along, Ma'am. I got a different reason for taking you upstairs from what you seem to think."

Real fear flickered in her eyes, but she said angrily, "All men have the same idea about a girl who sings and dances in a saloon. You're no different from the rest, even if Sam Sloan does think you're a little tin God on wheels."

Pat shouldered the glass door open, drew her through into the lobby. He turned and spoke quietly to the group of men edging forward, "You boys will save yourselves a lot of trouble if you stay on that side of this door. Happens I'm still sheriff in Powder Valley—an' this is law-business."

An audible gasp came from Kitty's carmine lips as he closed the door firmly behind them. She swayed back at arm's length from him and her eyes were widely dilated. Her full bosom rose and fell as she panted, "You're still—the sheriff?"

Pat nodded grimly. "I'm still carryin' my badge."

"But—what about the other man? Jeth Purdue?"

"Right now Jeth's bein' right quiet inside the locked jail-house." Pat frowned and gave her an angry shake. "You might's well come along quiet, Ma'am. I'm takin' charge here instead of Jeth."

"Don't tell him a word, Kitty." The warning was a venomous snarl from the lips of Joe Deems. He stood at the end of a passageway leading off the lobby into the hotel dining room, and he was flanked by two men with guns in their right hands. Pat recognized the two gunmen as helpers around the hotel. Deems had a bandage around his head. His yellowish eyes were slate-hard.

Pat said quietly. "You're a fool, Deems. This won't get you anywhere but in jail along with Jeth Purdue. There's still law in Dutch Springs."

Deems said, "I'm playing my own cards, Stevens. Keep your guns on him, boys." He stepped forward slowly, and his gun-hands stayed behind, covering Pat.

"Did you hear what he said, Joe?" Kitty spoke swiftly. "He's still the sheriff!"

Deems grated, "I said to keep your mouth shut." He stopped in front of her and warned Pat, "You better let go of her arm."

Pat shrugged and let go of Kitty Lane's arm. There was a red splotch on the white flesh where his hard fingers had held her in a merciless grip. She stepped swiftly backward, rubbing the bruised place with the fingers of her other hand.

PAT glanced beyond her at Deems' two men. Their guns were held loosely, in the manner of men who knew what they were doing. He knew it would be suicide to go for his own holstered weapons, and he'd stayed alive this long in Powder Valley by not trying his luck against such odds.

Pat said, "All right, Deems. Go ahead an' play your cards. But be damned sure they're not topped."

"Just back up toward the door and don't let your hand get careless."

Pat backed slowly toward the front door of the hotel, keeping his hands in front of him. He said, "You're a fool, Deems. I aim to find Sam an' Ezra. What's all this gun-play about?"

Deems darted a sideways look at Kitty. "What's he been saying to you?"

"He acts crazy. Said I had to go upstairs with him."

Deems swung on Pat abruptly. "You've already been upstairs—while I was out in the kitchen getting my head fixed. What did you find that time?"

Pat shook his head and said blandly, "Sam's an' Ezra's doors were locked an' I couldn't find 'em. I thought maybe Kitty would know where a key was."

"There's something else on his mind," Kitty told her employer faintly. "He asked me the funniest thing. Asked me what I knew about some other man I never heard of. Some name like—Fred something or other."

"Fred Ralston," Pat supplied coldly.

"That's it. What do you suppose he meant, Joe? He's acting awfully funny."

Deems grated, "What do you know about Fred Ralston?"

"Not much," Pat admitted frankly. "He's a dude from Denver that came in on the stage tonight. I'd like to know what he's doing in Powder Valley."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"That's what I'd like to do," Pat said mildly. "I knocked on his door, too, but it was locked."

He saw a swift spasm of relief flicker over Kitty's face, but Joe Deems frowned and addressed Tom Forrest behind the counter.

"Is that Ralston fellow up in his room?"

"I reckon," the clerk's voice quavered. "He went up an' I ain't seen him come back down."

Deems frowned and said, "Maybe something's happened to him." He went toward the clerk. "Give me an extra key to his room."

"Joe!" Kitty spoke in sharp warning.

Deems ignored her. He got a key from the clerk and told Pat, "I'm sorry about all this trouble. But you've got to understand that a man just naturally doesn't like to get pushed around in his own hotel."

Pat said, "Pulling guns on a sheriff is a good way to get pushed around a lot more."

Deems nodded affably. "I guess that wasn't very smart, but I've got a crazy temper when I get riled up." He turned to his men and ordered, "You boys put your guns away and go on into the back. I won't need you any more."

Kitty Lane came forward swiftly as the men turned and disappeared. She asked fearfully, "What are you going to do, Joe?"

HE LOOKED at her in some surprise. "Why, I guess I'd better prove to the sheriff there isn't anything wrong here. If that Ralston man is wanted by the law, I'm not going to protect him. Come on, Sheriff." He turned toward the stairway.

"Wait, Joe," Kitty clung to him desperately. Her eyes were round and enormous. "Can't you—"

"I know what I'm doing."

"But you don't!" Her voice rose hysterically. "Don't take him up there, Joe! Don't do it."

Joe Deems thrust the entertainer

away roughly. "This is still my hotel and I'll run it."

Pat stepped forward and said quietly, "I'd mighty well like to know why Miss Kitty don't want me upstairs."

"You know how women are," Deems grunted with disgust. "Always getting crazy ideas about what somebody's going to think. Quit acting so innocent," he went on brutally to Kitty. "Every man in Dutch Springs knows what you are by this time."

Kitty drew back from him, her eyes dark with anger. She wet her red lips but didn't say anything.

"The way you've been carrying on with Sam Sloan—having him in your room and ordering drinks and all," Deems went on disgustedly. "Everybody knows it. Everybody knows you were after his money and didn't care much how you got it."

Kitty's lips tightened. She swung her hand in a wide arc against his cheek.

Deems' eyes blazed and he doubled his fist. Pat Stevens stepped between them, facing Kitty and backing her away. "Is Joe telling the truth? Are you afraid to have me go upstairs for fear of what I'll find out about you and Sam?"

She shook her head and sobbed, "No. That's not true. Sam is kind and good and—"

"And he's got eight thousand dollars cash," Joe Deems put in cynically from behind Pat. "Come on, Sheriff. Let's get on upstairs. More than likely Sam Sloan's passed out cold in his room and that's why you couldn't get any answer."

Pat kept his back turned to Deems. He gazed steadily down into Kitty's eyes. "How long since you've been upstairs?"

"A long time. I went down the back stairs and into the kitchen for my supper before starting to work."

"And you left Sam in his room?" Pat persisted.

She nodded. "He had been—drinking."

"With you," Joe Deems put in.

She looked past Pat at Deems with a look of hatred on her face. She faltered, "I had a couple of drinks with him before we went upstairs."

"I'm not talking about those drinks. I'm talking about the bottle you hit together in your room." There was grating anger in Deems' voice, and another note that puzzled Pat. The hotel proprietor sounded as though it hurt him to say it, as though he rubbed salt on a raw wound by repeating his accusation of intimacy between Kitty Lane and Sam. He sounded, by God, Pat thought suddenly, like a jealous man.

He turned on Deems and said, "You didn't like the way Kitty was carrying on with Sam, did you?"

"It wasn't good for business," growled Deems. "She was hired to be friendly to all the men, but when I brought her here from Denver I warned her that in a little town like this it'd make trouble if she was any more than just friendly to any certain man."

"So you tried to make her leave Sam alone?"

"I kept telling her that paying so much attention to Sam wasn't good for business."

"Are you sure," Pat asked slowly, "that was your only reason?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you were sore because you wanted Kitty for yourself."

PAT swung about at the sound of a gasp from Kitty. "Wasn't that it?" he probed.

She caught her under lip between her teeth and shook her head wearily. "Why are you asking all these questions? What business is it of yours?"

"Sam Sloan's my best friend. If he's in any kind of trouble, I'm going to back him up."

"What kind of—trouble?" Kitty asked faintly.

"That's what I reckon we'll find out when we go upstairs. How about it?" Pat urged. "Hasn't Joe Deems tried to be more than just a boss since you've been working for him here in Dutch Springs?"

"You're talking a lot about things you don't know anything about," Deems put in. "Kitty happens to be a married woman. Do you think I'd

be fool enough to make love to her?"

Kitty gasped, "Joe! You shouldn't—"

"Is that right?" Pat pounded the question at her.

Bright color flamed in her cheeks, dimming the artificial rouge. "Suppose it is?"

"Why didn't you tell anyone here in town?"

Kitty threw back her head and asked scornfully, "How many men would have come here to drink and dance with me if they'd known? My job depended on being popular."

"So you tricked them all," Pat said in deep disgust. "It's a hell of a way to make a living, Ma'am—beggin' your pardon."

"Don't be so high and mighty," sneered Joe Deems. "There wasn't anything wrong with the arrangement. Kitty needed a job and she was good for my business. She didn't encourage the men particularly—except Sam Sloan." There it was again. That curious sound of baffled anger as he spoke Sam's name.

"It's not my business what anybody does as long as they stay inside the law," Pat admitted sourly, "but some things don't smell good in my nose even if they aren't criminal." He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "All right. We're gettin' nowhere in a hurry standing here talkin'. We'll all go upstairs, an' maybe both of you will decide it'd be better to tell the truth." He stepped back politely and motioned for Kitty to precede him up the stairway.

She hesitated, glancing quickly at Joe Deems, but his face remained stonily emotionless. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, then went past Pat slowly, keeping her face averted and not looking at him.

Deems took her arm and they started up together.

The front door of the hotel burst open to admit a running and excited young cowboy. He slithered to a stop and shouted, "Sheriff! The bank's bein' robbed. C'mon quick!"

Pat whirled to face him. "What's that?"

"The bank! It's bein' robbed. I seen 'em just now. Breakin' in the back door. You can ketch 'em if you hurry."

Pat ran to the door leading into the saloon and shouted loudly: "Listen every one of you. You're deputized. Every man that's got a gun, come an' help me surround the bank. That is—all except you, Harold Morgan." He singled out one of his close neighbors, a sober, steady rancher who had been drinking less than the others in the saloon.

"You go upstairs, Morgan. Stand guard at room fifteen an' the next one to it. That's Kitty Lane's room. Don't let anybody in or out. The rest of you come on out the back way, an' be quiet about it. We can circle around behind the bank before anyone knows we're comin'."

He trotted across the saloon floor to the rear exit, and two dozen armed men swarmed after him eagerly.

CHAPTER V

THE back door of the hotel opened onto an alleyway with small residences on the other side of it. Pat Stevens swung to the right around the hotel with his informally deputized crew right at his heels. He slowed as he approached the front of the building on the street corner, motioned his deputies to stay back while he cautiously peered around the corner and down Main Street toward the Dutch Springs bank on the opposite side and near the other end of the block.

He drew back after a slow survey of the street and said grimly, "Every thing looks quiet in front of the bank. You: Jim, Todd, Ben, Max, an' Slim. You five string out on both sides of the street an' saunter down to the bank slow-like. Just act like nothing's happened, an' don't tell nobody nothing. Couple of you stay on this side of the street opposite the bank. Other three cross over an' mosey up close. Stay right there where you can cover the front, but don't start nothing less'n they try to come out that way. If they do, don't waste any lead tryin' to cripple 'em.

"Mark Johnson," Pat went on swiftly to a grizzled rancher right be-

hind him, "you gather up ten men an' take 'em back around the hotel an' through the alley to the end of the block. Start driftin' 'em across the street an' around behind the bank. Spread your men out to block off the street and that side of the bank. Pick your men an' get started."

While Johnson was swiftly selecting ten men to go with him, Pat told the others, "We'll string out and cross the street to this end an' go up behind the bank from this side. Last two men stay at this end to block off the street. You others spread out about fifty feet apart so there won't be a chance of anybody gettin' through. We don't want nothing like the last time the bank was robbed, 'bout seven years ago that was, when Sam an' Ezra an' me had to trail the gang all the way down into New Mexico. I'll go first an' get right up in behind the bank.

"You, Walter," Pat ordered the young puncher who had brought the alarm. "Come along with me an' tell me more about this. We'll get goin'."

He stepped forward from behind the concealment of the building and sauntered across the moonlit dusty street. Walter followed him at about fifty feet, and when Pat reached the shadow of a building on the other side, he stopped and waited for the cowboy to reach his side.

He nodded with grim satisfaction as another man stepped out into the bright moonlight and started across as Walter stepped up on the boardwalk. That would do it. If they'd all be casual and take their time in following each other, the chances were that the lookout wouldn't notice anything amiss—that was, if the bank robbers had a lookout posted to watch the street.

He caught Walter's arm as the youth reached his side, started hurrying him around to the alley leading down behind the bank, and questioned him.

"How'd you come to get onto it, Walter? You think anybody noticed you coming for me?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Stevens." Walter's teeth were chattering but he made a manful effort to hide his nervousness. "I was coming across the alley when I heard a funny noise at the back door of the bank. It's in a dark shadow and I couldn't see good. So I stopped and listened."

"What were you doing in the alley?"

"I'd been to see—I was visiting Miss Grubbs that lives across the alley from the bank. Miss Jane. And I took the short-cut when I left her house."

They turned into the alley. Pat said, "Keep talkin'."

"Well, like I say, I heard a funny noise but I couldn't see anything. So I sort of crouched down and waited. I heard it again—then a loud creaking. Like the back door was maybe being pried open. Then I saw a flame like a match striking, inside the bank. So I knew something was wrong and I hightailed it around and asked at the Gold Eagle for you. Someone said you were at the Jewel. And—that's all, I reckon."

"You didn't tell 'em at the Gold Eagle what was up?"

"No. I thought I ought to find you."

"An' you didn't see anyone? Don't know how many there are? Don't know where they got their hawses hitched for a fast getaway?"

"No, I don't, Mr. Stevens," the youth admitted regretfully. "I thought I ought to hurry and get you."

"You did just right." Pat squeezed his arm and lowered his voice. "We're comin' up to the bank now. You're right, son. There is a light inside. Mighty dim. Comin' out of the vault, I reckon."

PAT stopped and ordered briskly, "You stay right here. Stop the first man to come up an' keep him here with you. The others'll be scattered out behind. We got 'em trapped," he went on grimly. "They ain't got a chance to get away. I'm going to Injun up to that back door an' be a reception committee of one when they try to come out with the money."

He left the lad posted there, and moved forward slowly and cautiously

toward a dull square of light showing through a dirty back window of the bank. There were empty tin cans and debris scattered out in the rear of the bank building, and Pat had to move with the utmost caution to keep his progress noiseless.

He had one gun out and ready to fire as he crept forward. The darkness here was made black and complete by the high wall of a building on the east blocking off the rays of the moon that was still low above the horizon.

It would be smart, Pat figured, for the robbers to have left one man outside the bank on guard with their horses, their only means of escape would be effectually cut off.

He crouched far forward to make his body into the smallest target possible, and moved forward one cautious step after another, without seeing or hearing anything to indicate the presence of any other living thing in the area of blackness behind the bank.

A dog came trotting up the alley behind Pat. He stopped and sniffed the air, then let out a short, curious bark. Pat sank back to his haunches and set his teeth together tightly. The dog started toward him slowly, on stiff legs. Pat stayed very still, cursing all dogs under his breath, and this member of the breed in particular.

It was a small, spotted dog with one floppy ear and the other one pointed and alert. He stopped ten feet from Pat and barked again. Pat sucked air between his lips to make a soft, welcoming sound.

The dog trotted closer and stopped again to sniff the air suspiciously, then came on and rubbed against the sheriff ecstatically, making small whimpering sounds to indicate his delight.

Pat scratched him behind the ears with his left hand, patted him and whispered, "Stay here, dawg. Better not get any closer to trouble."

But the dog was not willing to lose his new-found friend so easily. When Pat started forward on hands and knees, he trotted past him toward the bank, then stopped to look back and wag his tail encouragingly.

Pat moved on, staying close to the ground and disregarding the spotted pup as best he could. Complete silence blanketed the dark-shadowed scene. Not a sound came from Main Street beyond the bank. The deputized men had been wholly successful in closing in to surround the bank on all four sides without warning the robbers.

Pat Stevens was grimly sure the trap was effectively set this time, and he gave up his plan of trying to locate the horses of the thieves. With every avenue of escape closed to them, Pat turned directly toward the bank, bent on smoking them out into the open where they could be disposed of or captured.

The little dog ran ahead of him to the back door of the bank. He stopped there, wagging his tail furiously. When Pat got close enough, he saw that the heavy door sagged open.

Still, no sound came from within the bank itself. The yellow blotch of light remained as the only concrete evidence of marauders within.

Pat Stevens lifted himself to his feet when he was ten feet from the open back door. He hesitated, then stepped sideways toward the lighted window. The dog trotted to him and rubbed against his legs. Pat stopped to pat him on the head, then went close to the window and tried to peer inside.

The glass was so dirty with accumulated grime that Pat could see nothing at all. He stood close to the window and listened intently, but could hear no sound from inside.

They were damn funny bank robbers, he told himself morosely. What were they doing inside the lighted bank so long? They must realize their danger, yet they were staying long enough to be having a picnic. It didn't make sense, didn't add up to the way bank robbers were supposed to act.

He pushed his Stetson back and scratched his head, turned to make a long slow survey of the darkness behind him. He could still see nothing, but he knew that armed men waited

back there, waited impatiently for a chance to throw lead.

HE KNEW how volunteer posses were. Sooner or later, one of the deputized men was going to get tired of waiting and would do something that would give the alarm. That might be disastrous. At the very least, it was likely to bring on more bloodshed than would probably be spilt if the robbers walked out into the trap unknowing.

Pat turned back from the window and cat-footed along the wall to the open back door.

He paused on the threshold, gun in hand, staring inside to the blackness and trying to get the layout of the rear interior of the bank clearly in his mind.

There was only a faint glow of light from far inside to the right. That meant the thieves were on the other side of the wooden partition where the bank's money was kept in a fireproof vault. He knew the door to that vault was none too strong. It could be forced by determined men. As a director of the bank, he had often urged the purchase of a burglar-proof safe, but the other directors had always voted him down on the idea, insisting that no one in Powder Valley was likely to rob the bank, and that no strangers could possibly know how easily the money could be obtained.

The rear door, for instance, had only a stout chain and padlock on it, yet that precaution was considered sufficient. Pat felt along the side of the door frame curiously, and discovered that the three heavy staples holding the chain had simply been pried out of the yielding wood. With an iron bar or a pick handle for leverage, it had been absurdly simple for a strong man to open the door and walk in.

Suddenly, while he hesitated there, the light went out inside the bank. Pat's body stiffened and his fingers tightened on the butt of his gun.

He heard furtive, scraping sounds on the other side of the partition. He took one step forward over the threshold, flattened himself against the inside wall beside the door.

The little dog whimpered outside, and then trotted confidently through the open door. He nuzzled his cold nose against Pat's bootleg, then trotted on across the wooden floor toward the point where the dim light had shone. His toenails made a light, clacking sound against the bare pine boards.

The clacking sound stopped, and the little dog whimpered loudly. Pat heard a faint chuckle from ahead in the blackness. Then the heavy sound of bootheels crunching toward the door—toward Pat Stevens.

Pat crouched against the wall with his gun ready. He strained his ears for further sounds to indicate how many men were inside the bank. He heard only that single pair of boots, rapidly nearing him. The owner of the boots was evidently a heavy man, completely without fear or contemptuous of any effort that might be made to stop him. His heels thudded down heavily on the floor, in measured cadence, as though he marched in time with an unheard drum.

Pat had to make a swift decision while the man went past. He could have touched him, could have thrust his gun forward and triggered it with the muzzle against the robber's body. But if there were more of them back there, that would give the alarm and give them some chance to escape—or to barricade themselves inside the bank building where they might be driven out only with a lot of gunfire.

In that split-second, Pat decided to let this one pass. The trap was well-laid outside. There was no possibility of escape if he was allowed to walk into it blind.

The man hesitated on the threshold. In that brief instant, his body and head were silhouetted against the moonlit sky — and Pat Stevens was looking at the huge bulk and scarred features of one-eyed Ezra, his long-time gun-partner and bosom friend.

There was no time for thought in that fleeting instant. No time to weigh friendship against duty. No

time to consider what the consequences might be.

There was only time for Sheriff Pat Stevens to know that Ezra must somehow be saved.

Right and wrong did not enter it. There was no time to declare himself. No chance to question why Ezra had suddenly turned to bank-robbing.

Pat only knew that he couldn't let Ezra be captured this way—just as he couldn't leave Sam Sloan's knife in the back of the dead man in the Jewel Hotel.

As Ezra took a forward step out into the night, Pat tilted the muzzle of his gun high and triggered it three times in a rapid succession.

He heard a single grunt of astonishment from the redheaded man, then the lunging forward of a heavy body.

Pandemonium broke out then, in response to Pat's three shots. The overly-nervous guards in the alley began shooting wildly, shouting to each other and running forward to close in on the unseen robber.

Pat stayed in the doorway. He heard the sudden thudding of hooves through the tumult

Ezra was mounted and was driving straight ahead out of the trap so carefully laid. Up and down the alley, men were running forward, betraying the fact that escape was closed off in both those directions.

The thudding hooves drove straight ahead, and Ezra sent his mount crashing through a flimsy board fence into the Grubbs' backyard while behind him men fired futilely at the speeding shape.

Pat ran forward, shouting loudly and with authority as a rider came galloping up from the west end of the alley.

"I'll take that hawse!" His voice lifted above the incoherent shouts and curses of the others. "This here's the sheriff."

The rider pulled up reluctantly and Pat grabbed the reins. "Out of the saddle, sonny. An' I'll take after that varmint."

The rider was a boy in his teens, and he leaped from the saddle without hesitation. Pat vaulted into the saddle without touching stirrups, and drove spurs into the horse's flanks. The startled animal leaped forward on Ezra's trail, and Pat turned to shout back:

"Gather up a posse an' follow me."

HE LEANED low on the horse's neck and guided him through the Grubbs' yard to the street beyond. He checked him momentarily to catch the sound of his fleeing friend, and nodded grimly when he heard two horses galloping away madly to the east.

He neck-reined his mount in that direction, gave him his head eastward to a point a quarter of a mile from town where the road forked northeastward and due south into the mountains.

He pulled his horse up at the forks and threw himself off, dropping to the ground with his head flat against the soil of the crossroads.

His ear caught the faint vibration of drumming hooves from the south fork. He got up slowly and brushed the dust from his clothes, remounted and turned his horse to face a group of angry, mounted men surging out from Dutch Springs.

"He went that way!" Pat shouted loudly, pointing in the direction away from the one he knew Ezra had chosen. "Up the north fork. You men ride after him. I got to get back to town on somethin' else."

He sat slouched in the saddle at the crossroads and watched the determined posse sweep away northeastward on a wild-goose chase. There was a bitter taste of overwhelming defeat in his mouth as he rode slowly back to town. He caught himself remembering that scene in Winters' store when he had been sworn in as sheriff and given the silver badge to wear as evidence of the confidence his fellow citizens had in his integrity.

His hand went up and crept inside his shirt pocket to touch the cold smoothness of that silver star. He jerked the badge out angrily and drew back his arm to throw it away into the night, but something would

not let him commit that final act of sacrilege.

He slowly slid the star back in his pocket, though with a look of bitter loathing on his face. When a man took the oath of sheriff he was supposed to give up having friends. He was sworn to enforce the law, yet tonight he had deliberately gotten rid of murder evidence against one man, and had deliberately permitted another man to escape the consequences of robbing the local bank.

In his heart Pat Stevens hated himself for what he had done; yet in his heart he knew, too, that under the same circumstances he would do the same again. Sheriff or no sheriff; silver star or no silver star, Sam Sloan and Ezra were his friends. No matter what they had done—they were still his friends. Nothing could alter that. It was something that happened to a man. You don't look for friendship, and you don't throw it away when it comes to you. It brings certain duties with it; and foremost of those is that you shall not forsake your friend.

Pat Stevens didn't put any such thoughts into words as he rode back to Dutch Springs, but they were in his heart in essence, and he knew they were there to stay.

CHAPTER VI

A SMALL group of excited men greeted Pat Stevens on Main Street when he rode slowly back into town after directing the posse away from the direction Ezra had taken.

They crowded around him, asking eager questions as he swung off his commandeered horse. No one knew exactly what had happened, and the small town was flooded with wild rumors.

Pat took time to explain the situation swiftly: "Some guy robbed the bank. Broke in the back door. We had him surrounded, but he got to his hawss an' got plumb away. I followed him to the crossroads east of town, an' there's a posse ridin' after him up the north fork. They'll get him, I reckon."

"How-come you're not ridin' with the posse, Sheriff?" a curious voice asked.

"This hawss I was forkin' didn't seem none too fast," Pat explained. "An' I had some important business back here in town at the Jewel Hotel. Some of you fellows see about gettin' that padlock an' chain back onto the rear door of the bank," he went on hastily. "Don't know how much money's gone, but maybe there's some still left in the vault that ought to be locked up." He turned away from them and strode up the street toward the hotel, feeling the weight of the towel-wrapped death-knife against his ankle with each step, a grim reminder of the role he had elected to play in concealing murder evidence.

Joe Deems and Kitty Lane were in the hotel lobby when he strode in. Kitty leaped up and demanded angrily, "Why have you got a guard posted at my door? What's all this mystery about, Sheriff Stevens?"

"What happened at the bank?" Joe Deems cut in. "We heard a lot of shooting but no one seems to know whether you caught the robbers or not."

"We didn't. Not yet. But there's a posse after him." Pat turned his gaze on Kitty and said slowly, "About your room, Ma'am. We'll go upstairs now an' take the guard off the door."

She tossed her head and said, "It's about time you let us in on the secret," and she and the hotel proprietor followed Pat up.

Along the upper hallway, Harold Morgan was disconsolately squatted on one heel with his back against the wall between the two rooms he was guarding. He looked up with a scowl, and slowly got to his feet when he saw the sheriff. "Sounds like I missed a lot of fun," he grumbled. "What's in these two rooms that you want guarded, Pat?"

"We'll find that out just as soon as Miss Lane opens her door," Pat promised him. "I want you right here, Morgan, for a witness to testify what's inside these rooms." He stepped aside politely and motioned

to Kitty's door. "Go ahead an' open it up.

Kitty hesitated in front of her door with a heavy hotel key in her hand. Light came through the keyhole from inside the room. She threw Pat Stevens a frightened look, then caught her underlip between her teeth and slowly inserted the key in the lock. There was a loud click as she turned the key. She took hold of the knob with a trembling hand and opened the door. She took one step inside the lighted room, and then swayed back with a little cry of anguish, throwing one hand up to cover her face.

PAT caught her by the shoulders and drew her aside gently to let Deems and Morgan view the huddled body of Fred Ralston on the floor.

Harold Morgan whistled shrilly. "A dead un, by God!" He stepped forward to look down at the body wonderingly.

Pat's gaze was concentrated on Joe Deems. The hotel proprietor stood very still, his yellowish eyes slitted downward at the corpse. First there was a fleeting look of triumph, then of slow puzzlement on Deem's face. He wet his lips and said hoarsely, "What kind of game is this, Sheriff? What's that dead man doing in Kitty's room?"

Pat said, "That's what I'm wondering." He took hold of Deems' arm and drew him forward. "Take a good look," he urged. "See if you can identify him."

The faint sound of Kitty's sobbing filled the hotel bedroom as Joe Deems looked down steadily at the dead man. He wet his lips again and muttered, "Looks like the Denver man that came in on tonight's stage. What was his name?"

"Fred Ralston," Pat supplied grimly. "As you know plumb well."

"That's right. That's the name he signed to the hotel register."

"Knifed," Morgan grunted. He was on his knees examining the body. "Right through the heart, looks like."

"Where's the weapon?" Deems demanded explosively. "You can't stab a man through the heart without using a knife."

"I reckon we better ask Miss Lane about that." Pat turned to the sobbing woman and demanded harshly, "What'd you do with the knife when you stuck him?"

She didn't seem to understand. She shook her head in bewilderment. "The—knife?" she repeated stupidly.

Pat moved to her side and gave her a little shake. "The knife you killed him with. It ain't here."

"It—isn't?" She sounded disbelieving, but somehow glad. She steadied herself, then went on rapidly. "Why do you think I know anything about it?" You don't think that I—that I—" She faltered with a look of horror on her expressive face.

"He's here in your room. Locked in from the outside. An' you've got the key," Pat pointed out grimly.

"I don't—I don't understand. Who is he? How did he get here?"

"Maybe he came in through this side door," Morgan offered eagerly. He got up and opened the door into Ralston's room. "Yes sir," he reported. "Door's unlocked. And there's a suitcase and hat here on the bed."

"That's the room that was assigned to Mr. Ralston," Deems put in sharply. "Number fifteen. I remember Tom Forrest told me he asked for that number particular."

"Now, I wonder why he'd do that?" Pat mused. "Bein' a stranger in town an' all. I expect lots of men would like to move into the room next to yours, Miss Kitty, but how did this man from Denver know which one to ask for?"

"How do I know?" she cried wildly. "I never saw him before. I don't know anything about all this."

Deems' expression hardened. He circled the body, went to stand in front of the two chairs with the table between them. He pointed to the whisky bottle and two glasses on the tray. "You'd better tell the truth, Kitty," he said slowly, with his back to her. "You're likely to get into real trouble if you try to protect someone. This is murder. It's serious."

She took a step forward with flashing eyes. "I don't know what you mean, Joe. If you think that I—"

Deems stepped aside and lifted his eyebrows. "You can see for yourself, Sheriff. Kitty was in here drinking with some man before supper."

PAT nodded slowly. "Looks like it. Mr. Ralston, I reckon." He sighed. "Sure looks like Miss Kitty isn't tellin' the truth. 'Pears to me she had it fixed with Ralston for him to come here from Denver an' rent the room next to hers. Then he came in an' they started drinkin' an' got into an argument. So she knifed him an' ran out and locked the door. That's the way it looks to you, Morgan?" he asked the rancher who was looking on with wide-eyed interest.

"Sure does look that way," Morgan said importantly. "He must have known her, all right, to've asked for room fifteen. And this here door was unlocked. And she was sure in here drinking with him while he was still alive."

"Don't you see, Kitty?" Deems' voice was like a savage whiplash across the entertainer's face. "This hick sheriff is going to hang this murder on you if you don't tell the truth and tell it fast."

Kitty Lane's eyes clung to those of her employer for a long moment. Then her gaze wavered down to the body of the dead man. She shook her head and said, "I don't know what you mean, Joe."

"Tell them what really happened," he snapped. "Tell them who drank whisky with you in here."

"I—drank it by myself," she flared.

"Out of two glasses?" asked Pat.

"Yes." She glared at him defiantly. "I always drink out of two glasses. One in each hand. I can get it down faster that way. And the faster I get it down, the faster I forget what beasts all men are." Tears ran down her rouged cheeks and she wiped them away angrily with the back of her hand.

"You smoked a lot of cigarettes, too," Joe Deems put in sharply, indicating the burned-down, brown-paper butts on the tray.

"I always smoke a lot when I'm drinking two-handed."

Harold Morgan pushed his way forward to peer down with interest at the tray. "I never saw you roll brown-paper cigarettes, Miss Lane," he expostulated respectfully. "Only last night you turned me down when I offered my brown papers. Said you always used white."

"You know you're lying, Kitty," Deems said wearily. "Sam Sloan was in here with you tonight."

"By golly," said Morgan with interest. "I bet you're right, Deems. Sam always smoked his butts down short like this. Remember, Pat, how we used to laugh at Sam about burning his fingers on those short butts he was always nibbling on?"

Pat Stevens nodded heavily. "But there's plenty of other men do the same."

"Sam Sloan is the sheriff's best friend," Deems reminded Morgan venomously. "Stevens would do anything to cover up for him. Even to maybe hiding murder evidence," he ended slowly.

Pat looked at him with hard, alert eyes. "Meanin' what, Deems?"

"Nothing." Deems shrugged his shoulders. "Only, as Mr. Morgan sees, right here's the evidence that Sam was in here tonight—and you're trying to protect Sam by claiming he wasn't here."

"I'm not claiming anything. I said lots of other men smoked their butts down short. I'm waitin' for Miss Kitty to tell us who smoked those."

"All right. It was Sam," she admitted wearily. "He came in to have a drink and a cigarette with me before supper. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Go on and tell the rest of it," Deems ordered.

"That's all there is to tell." Her voice rose wildly. "We had some drinks together. Then he went into his room and I went downstairs to eat supper."

"Leaving your door locked?" Pat asked.

"Yes."

"And I suppose Ralston just walked in here and stabbed himself and then swallowed the knife," said Deems angrily.

"Maybe he did. I don't know." Kitty Lane sank down wearily on a little padded bench in front of the bureau and covered her face with her hands.

"HOW come that door to be unlocked," Pat asked her.

"I don't know." Kitty's voice was muffled. She didn't take her hands away from her face.

"Do you leave it unlocked all the time—for the convenience of anyone renting that room?"

"Certainly not," Joe Deems put in angrily. "The Jewel isn't that kind of hotel, Stevens. And Kitty isn't that kind of woman."

"Maybe not. But I still want her to tell me whether she unlocked that door on purpose or whether it just happened to be unlocked."

"And I still tell you I don't know." Kitty Lane raised her head. "It's always been locked before. I didn't notice it today. I didn't have any reason to look at it."

"Do you still claim you don't know Ralston?"

She glanced at the dead man and shuddered. "I never saw him before."

"How'd he come to ask for the room next to yours?"

"I don't know!" Kitty sprang to her feet. "How can I tell why some man did something? Maybe he was superstitious about number fifteen. Maybe he always asks for number fifteen at a hotel."

"But he doesn't always go through a door into the next room an' get himself killed," Pat argued. "That only happened this one time."

Deems said harshly, "I still wonder what happened to the knife that killed him." He was regarding Kitty intently and there was an odd note of anger in his voice.

Kitty caught her breath in sharply. She said, "So do I," in a wondering tone.

Deems scowled at her and started to say something further, but Kitty turned on the sheriff and asked, "What did you know about all this? You've been acting mysterious all evening."

"That's right, Sheriff," Deems put in. "You asked Kitty downstairs if she knew Ralston. And you were dragging her up here to this room when you got the alarm about the bank being robbed."

"That's right, Pat." Harold Morgan nodded his head with perplexity. "You sent me up to keep guard over these two rooms. Looks like you knew there was a dead man in here."

Pat Stevens hesitated. He wasn't ready, yet, to admit he had been in this room earlier in the evening. He was too conscious of having Sam's bloodstained knife hidden inside his boot for that. He said gruffly, "I got tipped off that something was wrong up here. That's why I came in the first place."

"Who tipped you off?" Deems was watching him keenly.

"That," said Pat, "is my business."

"I think it's mine, too, Sheriff. After all, I'm pretty much concerned about this."

Pat shook his head. "A sheriff wouldn't get very many tips if he told where they came from."

"Could it be," sneered Deems, "that you don't want to tell because it might point to someone's guilt?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know damn well what I mean," Deems exploded. "Kitty admits Sam Sloan was in here with her before supper. They were drinking together and he was pretty drunk. Also, he was crazy about Kitty. Now, there's a dead man here and Sam has disappeared. Looks to me like you're covering up for him."

"You accusin' Sam of this murder?" Pat asked flatly.

DEEMS shrugged his shoulders. "It could be that Ralston came through that door while Sam was in here. Sam was drunk enough to kill him thinking he was protecting Kitty."

"Not with a knife," Harold Morgan declared vigorously. "Not Sam

Sloan. He might've gunned a man for that, but he'd never use a knife while his gun was handy."

"Maybe he didn't have a gun," Deems argued. "Maybe he'd left it in his room."

"How about it," Pat demanded of Kitty. "Was Sam wearin' his six-gun?"

"What does it matter? I didn't notice, I guess. I know Sam didn't do this."

"Then that leaves you," snarled Deems. "Damn it, Kitty. Do you want that pretty neck of yours stretched at the end of a rope?"

She stared at him as though she didn't quite comprehend his words, then smiled a bitter little smile. "I don't know. It might be—a good way to end this crazy life."

"Nonsense," Deems said vigorously. "You can't sacrifice yourself, Kitty. Damn it, a man would think you were in love with Sam Sloan."

"Maybe," said Kitty, very low, "I was."

Deem's face became contorted with anger. "That ugly little runt? You were after his money. You know that's all you wanted." He seemed to be almost pleading with her to verify his statement.

She smiled listlessly and didn't say anything.

After a moment's scowling hesitation, Joe Deems strode forward and shouldered her aside from her position directly in front of the bureau. "You're acting mighty funny, Kitty. Why are you staying so close to this bureau? You got something hidden in it? Something you don't want us to find?"

"What do you think I'd have hidden?"

"A knife, maybe."

"I don't own a knife."

"But it might be somebody else's knife. Sam Sloan's, maybe. And it might have blood on it." Deems turned to Pat. "Don't you think we should make a search, Sheriff?"

Pat said, "It wouldn't hurt." He stepped forward and Deems drew back and ostentatiously folded his arms to indicate that he wasn't responsible for anything Pat might find hidden in the bureau.

Pat pulled the top drawer open and began to rummage around among a litter of feminine things, feeling foolish as he did so but thinking that it would look better if he pretended to search for the knife that was even now hidden inside his boot.

His eyes narrowed after a moment, and he drew out a small roll of parchment, tied with a blue ribbon in a big bow knot. He held it up to Kitty and asked, "What's this?"

Her eyes widened and she seemed to flinch, but she said, "It's nothing. Just an old memento I've kept all these years."

Pat said, "I'd like to see what kind of thing you keep tied up with a blue ribbon, Ma'am." His big fingers awkwardly fumbled with the knot, and he took a long time untying it.

When he finally rolled the sheet of parchment out, he studied it bleakly and nodded, muttering, "I thought it looked like a wedding certificate."

His bronzed features tightened and he let the parchment roll back up.

Kitty shrank back with both hands going up to her bosom as Pat turned on her. He said, "I reckon it's time you started tellin' some of the truth, Mrs Fred Ralston."

CHAPTER VII

"GOOD GOD, Sheriff!" ejaculated Joe Deems. "Do you mean that — that Kitty — was this dead man's wife?"

And Harold Morgan echoed, "Mrs. Fred Ralston?" with his mouth hanging stupidly.

Kitty flashed a look of utter scorn upon Deems. "All right," she gritted between her teeth. "So now, you know. I was married to him. I've been married to him for ten loathsome years. I hated him! Do you hear me? I despised him. I'm glad he's dead. I should have done it myself ten years ago." She sank down to the floor, sobbing wildly.

Deems shook his head and muttered to Pat, "I knew Kitty was married to a man whom she hated, but I didn't know his name."

Pat Stevens leaned down and caught hold of Kitty's arm. He lifted her up gently and led her to the bed. "Sit down there, Ma'am. Soon as you get to feelin 'able we'll go on with our talk."

Deems caught his arm as he turned away from her. "What do you think this means, Sheriff? You don't think she murdered her husband?"

Pat said stolidly, "I'm tryin' not to do too much thinkin' right now. When she gets over her crying spell, we'll see what she's got to say."

He strode across to the whisky bottle still sitting on the tray between the two chairs, picked it up and pulled the cork out. He put the neck of the bottle in his mouth and drank deeply, sighed and mopped sweat from his face when he set the bottle down. He got out his makings and slowly rolled a cigarette as he turned back toward the other two men in the room.

Kitty lay face down on the bed and her bare shoulders shook with sobs. Harold Morgan was regarding her wonderingly, and Deems had stepped back to sit down on the bench in front of the bureau.

Pat got his cigarette rolled, and put fire to the end of it. He went to the bed and leaned over to touch Kitty's bare shoulder with his hard fingertips. "That had ought to be enough cryin'," he told her. "We're still waiting to get the rights of this killing."

"I see it all now," Deems broke in harshly. "Sam was in here with her and they were half-drunk together. He was probably making love to her. In the meantime, her husband has checked into the room next to hers without her knowing it — and he walks in on them. It would naturally make him mad to find another man in his wife's bedroom. So he must have jumped Sam, and Sam—"

"We'll let the lady tell it," Pat interrupted him brusquely.

Kitty rolled over on her side and peered up at him out of tear-dimmed eyes. "It was awful," she choked out. "I thought Fred was in Denver. Sam was here with me. There wasn't anything wrong in that. None of you have a right to make anything wrong out of us having a drink together." She sat up and blinked at them defiantly.

"No one's sayin' what's wrong an' what's right," Pat soothed her. "Go on an' tell us what happened."

"Sam was — asking me to marry him." Kitty dropped her head and laced her fingers together nervously in her lap. "I was having a hard time putting him off," she confessed. "I was afraid to tell him I was already married." She lifted her head defiantly and told Pat, "I'd have married Sam if I'd been free. I want you to believe that. I liked him a lot. I guess I loved him—if a woman like me can love a man." Her voice was harsh with bitterness on the last words.

PAT said gently, "I reckon I believe you, Ma'am. Makes me feel better—sort of. Go ahead."

"The door opened," Kitty said tonelessly, "and there was Fred. My husband. He stood there and sneered at us."

"Which door?" asked Pat.

"That one." Kitty indicated the door into number 15.

"You don't know how it got unlocked?"

"No. I don't. Unless Fred got in here somehow and unlocked it before I came up to my room."

Pat sighed and said, "Go on."

"Sam jumped up and began swearing at him for breaking into a lady's room. And Fred laughed and said, 'That's no lady, you fool. That's my wife.' And then Fred began cursing and threatening him. And—well, they—I guess Sam thought he was reaching in his pocket for a gun." Kitty shuddered at the recollection. "And before I could stop him he had his knife out and was on top of Fred. It was awful. He was terribly drunk, you see," she appealed to Pat. "That makes a difference, doesn't it? In the eyes of the law?"

Pat shook his head. "I'm not the judge nor the jury."

"Drunkenness won't be any defense," Deems put in stridently. "Not for a man who kills a woman's hus-

band after he's caught them together. Anybody knows that's murder."

Without looking at Deems, Pat said, "You'd do better to keep your mouth out of this. Go ahead, Ma'am. What happened then?"

"I told you Sam was terribly drunk. He toppled over on top of Fred. Passed out. I couldn't move him. I was frantic. I rushed out in the hall and remembered Ezra. I knew he'd help me. Or, help Sam. So I ran and knocked on his door. I got him to come here and he picked Sam up and carried him out. He was groaning about you being sheriff and finding it out," she went on swiftly, "and I remembered that I'd heard you were turning your badge over to Jeth Purdue tonight.

"And some men say Jeth isn't as honest as he could be. I don't know about that, but I remembered it and I told Ezra I thought maybe we could fix things. You know, by paying Jeth to keep it quiet." Kitty paused to wring her hands together, then went on in a pleading tone:

"You see, I felt responsible. It was all my fault. And I knew Sam had struck in self-defense, but I also knew that it would be called murder because of the circumstances—with Fred being my husband and all. So I made Ezra promise not to do anything until I could try to fix things up with Jeth Purdue. I thought if I told him the truth," she faltered uncomfortably, "and if Sam and Ezra offered to pay him, he might help us get rid of Fred's body, or fix up a different story, or something. I know it was terribly wrong, but what else could I do?"

"And then," Pat said, "you found out I was still sheriff instead of Jeth?"

"Yes."

"Where did you come into it?" Pat growled, whirling to look directly at Joe Deems. "You were mighty dead-set that I shouldn't come up here. You even pulled a gun to try and stop me. Why were you worried?"

Deems compressed his lips and cleared his throat. "I knew something was wrong," he confessed. "Kitty saw you from the back when you first walked into the saloon. She called me and begged me to keep you away from up here. I didn't know why. She didn't tell me it was murder. But she said it would be bad for the hotel—for business. So I did my best to stop you."

"Where are Sam and Ezra now?" Harold Morgan asked suddenly.

Pat turned to look at Kitty. "I guess Sam's still in his room," she said pitiably. "I've seen him get drunk like that before, and it generally lasts all night. I don't know about Ezra. I haven't seen either one of them since—" she paused to shudder—"since Ezra carried Sam out of here."

"We'd better unlock Sam's room and arrest him," Deems said importantly. "I'll go down and get an extra key."

"Get one for Ezra's room, too," Pat called after him.

"You won't—you're not going to arrest Sam, are you?" Kitty arose and came toward the sheriff. Her eyes were dry and they burned into his. "He didn't mean any harm. He was drunk, and it was all my fault. Every bit of it. If I'd told him I was married it would never have happened."

DESPITE his prejudice against her, Pat felt a surge of sympathy for the woman who stood before him pleading for Sam's life. It seemed to him he sensed an essential honesty and decency inside her which belied the painted face and sensuously bared bosom. He found himself believing, by God, that she had been in love with Sam, strange as it was that any woman could love the dark, ugly little man.

He said slowly, "I don't know just how things will turn out, Ma'am. Sam will have to take his chance, I reckon. It never pays to fool with the law. Bribin' a sheriff ain't never right, even if it does look like a good idea at the time."

Color came swiftly to Kitty's cheeks. "I didn't mean that," she protested. "I wouldn't think of trying to bribe you, Sheriff."

Joe Deems stuck his head in the

door and announced, "I've got those keys, Sheriff."

Pat went out, followed by Harold Morgan and Kitty. Deems inserted a key in the door on the other side of the hall, and opened the door with a flourish as though he were pulling rabbits out of a silk hat. He stepped back to let Pat enter the room first.

Pat stopped on the threshold and said, "Sam!" sharply.

There was no response from the dark room. Pat struck a match and walked in, found a candle on the bureau and lit it. The others crowded in through the doorway as he turned and lifted the flickering candle high above his head.

The bed was rumpled and unmade, and there was a litter of Sam's clothing on chairs and on the floor. But there was no Sam. Pat even got down and peered under the bed, pulled the curtain aside that made a clothes closet out of one corner of the room.

"Must be in the next room with Ezra," Deems grated in a disappointed tone. "Want me to unlock that door, Sheriff?"

Knowing full well that Ezra was at that moment riding southward with money stolen from the bank, Pat had to play the farce out as though he actually thought Ezra was in the next room. He said hastily, "Better let me knock first. If he's protectin' Sam, he'll more'n likely send lead through the door if he hears somebody unlockin' it."

He went out and handed the candle to Morgan, stepped to the next door and knocked loudly.

"Ezra!" he called. "Open up, Ezra. This is Pat." He waited a moment, then added loudly, "It's Pat. I'm comin' in, Ezra. Don't make things worse by shooting." He stepped back and nodded for Deems to unlock the door.

Deems cautiously stood far back to one side and held the key at arm's length as he inserted it in the lock. Pat took the candle from Morgan and walked in.

Ezra's room also was empty. It bore more signs of hurried flight than had Sam's. The bureau drawers were open and emptied on the floor, and everything was in the utmost confusion.

"Both of them gone," Deems muttered in an awed voice to Pat. "How do you reckon they got out?"

"Are you sure they didn't go down the back stairs?"

"They couldn't. The stairs lead right into the kitchen an' dining room where the help eat. There's always someone there. Looks like they just plain evaporated."

The single window in the room was open from the bottom. Pat went to it and uttered an exclamation, then leaned out and held the flickering candle to look down toward the ground. Deems hurried to his side and saw the lariat with one end tied to the foot of the bed and running to the window and out.

"So that's how they did it?" he said bitterly. "Got clean away while we were sitting around talking. You better get after them in a hurry, Sheriff."

Pat said, "I don't need you to tell me my business, Deems. If you'd told me as soon as you knew something was wrong, this wouldn't have happened."

HE PULLED himself back inside and set the candle down on the bureau. "If I know Sam an' Ezra they'll be plenty of miles away from Dutch Springs by now."

"Do you intend to just stand there and let them escape?" Deems demanded.

Pat didn't pay any attention to him. He said to Morgan, "You'll have to stay deputized. You've heard everything that went on here tonight an' you'll be able to swear to it."

Morgan said, "All right, Pat. What are you going to do?"

"I'll be plenty busy—with a bank robbery and a murder all in one night."

"What about Jeth Purdue?" Morgan protested. "Why not put him in charge here, seeing that he's to be sworn in as sheriff tomorrow?"

Pat's features tightened grimly. He said, "I aim to have a talk with Jeth Purdue right now. Like to have you sit in on it, Morgan. We might learn

something that'll tie up with what's happened here tonight."

He turned and walked out of the room, and Harold Morgan followed him.

They went downstairs together and out to the boardwalk. Main Street was deserted again, and all the citizens who weren't in the posse were gathered in saloons excitedly discussing the bank robbery.

Pat stopped at the Gold Eagle and stuck his head between the swinging doors to ask, "Heard anything from the posse yet?"

A series of no's answered him. Men began hurling eager questions at him, but he withdrew and went on toward the jail with Morgan by his side.

"They don't know the half of it," Morgan said. "If they knew about that dead man up at the Jewel Hotel they'd really have something to talk about all night."

Pat muttered some reply and kept on going.

Keeping pace with him, the rancher said nervously, "I'm sure mighty sorry about Sam. I know how it's hit you, Pat. You and him being such good friends."

Pat said, "Sam always was one for gettin' into trouble."

"That man was knifed in the back," Morgan said hesitantly. "Don't know whether you noticed it or not. I didn't say anything back there at the hotel.

Pat said, "I noticed it." He did not amplify the flat statement.

"That's what'll make it go so hard on Sam if he's caught," said Harold Morgan forlornly. "Making love to a married woman and killing her husband when he catches you is bad enough—but a knife in the back makes it one hell of a lot worse."

Pat nodded and agreed hopelessly. "Sam never was one to do things by halves. When he gets into trouble, you can trust him to make it bad trouble."

"Do you think you'll catch him, Pat?" Morgan spoke in a low tone as they approached the adobe jail and lean-to office. "I sure wouldn't blame you," he went on hurriedly, "if you didn't try hard. Like that woman said, the whole thing was her fault. Women like her ought to be hung," he went on angrily. "Dragging a man like Sam into a mess like that."

Pat said, "Sam an' Ezra will be together. I reckon I know where to look for 'em. That's why I'm leavin' you deputized an' in charge of the sheriff's office," he went on carefully. "I'll be ridin' alone after Sam an' Ezra, I reckon."

"Do you think you got to, Pat? Couldn't you maybe ride in the wrong direction?"

Pat said, "I'm still sheriff of Powder Valley whether I like it or not." He stopped in front of the padlocked door of the adobe jail and called, "Jeth! You asleep in there?"

Morgan looked at him in surprise, as though he thought Pat had suddenly gone insane. "This here's the jail. The office is around behind."

Pat said, "I know it's the jail. That's where I left Jeth Purdue."

Getting no reply to his call, he produced a big iron key and unlocked the barred door. It creaked loudly on rusty hindges as he pulled it open. He peered inside the dark interior and called again, "Jeth! Come on out."

He grunted with surprise when this brought no answer either. He struck a match and held the tiny flame out in front of him.

Its flickering light showed a body huddled on the bare dirt floor in front of a small barred window.

Pat stepped forward with Morgan right behind him. Neither of them said anything as they looked down at the bloody hole in Jeth Purdue's face where his nose had been.

CHAPTER VIII

THE match fizzled out in Pat Stevens' hand. The dying flame seared his leathery fingertips, but he was not aware of pain. In silence and in darkness, he got another match from his pocket and struck it.

Standing close beside him, Harold Morgan said in an awed voice, "Shot plumb in the face with a forty-five,

looks like. How you reckon it could have happened, Pat?"

Pat lifted his gaze to the barred window above Jeth Purdue's corpse. "Could of come through the window."

"That's it, I bet! If someone came around and called him to the window —stuck the muzzle through the bars! Yes sir," agreed Morgan excitedly. "That must be how it happened. But, who did it? Who had any reason to kill Jeth?"

Pat shook his head slowly as the second match burned to his fingertips. He backed away toward the open door, muttering, "That's what we got to find out, Morgan."

The deputized rancher followed him around the corner of the jail, knelt beside him as Pat struck a third match to study the ground underneath the window.

There had been a heavy shower that afternoon, and the ground was still damp enough to hold footprints. Pat nodded somberly as the yellow flare of the match clearly showed the outline of two feet standing side by side in front of the barred window.

"That's it, all right. A fellow stood here and called Jeth to the window —then let him have it in the face between the bars." He got up heavily as his third match flickered out in the night air.

"God'lmighty, Pat, this is bad business," breathed Morgan. "Two murders in one night. And both of 'em bad murders. A knife in the back and a man shot while he was locked up inside jail with no chance to do nothing. Do you reckon—?" He paused nervously and glanced at Pat.

"You mean do I reckon they're both tied together?" Pat asked harshly.

"That's what I was thinking," Harold Morgan confessed miserably. "But it couldn't be. I can see how Sam might have done the other one —being drunk and caught in Kitty's room like that by her husband. But he wouldn't shoot a man like this. Just right out in cold blood. Would he, Pat? Even if he did think he had a reason?"

"What kind of reason are you thinkin' about?" grated Pat.

"I'm thinking about what Kitty said up in her room. About planning with Ezra to fix it with Purdue to cover up that other killing. If Sam and Ezra decided to take it on the run instead of staying to face it—" Morgan's voice broke miserably. "But it couldn't be that way. I reckon it couldn't."

"You're guessin'," Pat said steadily, "that they were feared Kitty might already of told Jeth about the other. So they couldn't afford to leave him behind them alive when they took out. Ain't that it?"

"I guess I was thinking something like that. But I don't believe it, Pat. I sure don't."

PAT sighed and said, "Two murders an' a bank robbery all in a couple of hours—and on my last night as sheriff." He went around to the door of the lean-to-office and lit the lantern on the wall.

Morgan stopped in the doorway while Pat stood in the center of the floor and looked around the small office. Everything appeared to be as it had been when he went out. His bedroll was still tied up and waiting to be carried out; Jeth Purdue's gun still lay in the corner where Pat had kicked it a couple of hours earlier.

Then he noticed a sheet of paper lying on the bare table-top, weighted down with a .45 cartridge. He stepped close and glanced down at it, read the heavy pencil scrawl:

"Dere Pat. Sam and me are takin out. Its to bad jeth cudnt of bin sherif. Dont try to foler us.

Ezra"

Pat picked the sheet of paper up and crumpled it in his hand as though it were of no importance. Watching him from the doorway, Morgan asked eagerly, "You got a clue, Pat?"

Pat shook his head. "Nary a clue." He thrust the note in his pocket and turned to the cot, picked up the roll of bedding and slung it over his shoulder. "I reckon I'll tie this on behind my saddle an' be headin' out."

Morgan followed him around to an

iron hitching post where Pat's saddled horse was tied. He helped Pat adjust the roll behind the saddle, asking nervously, "What should I do about those two dead men?"

"Might as well tell the undertaker about them an' get 'em gathered up." Pat tugged a tight knot into a leather tie-string, then went on in a constrained tone, "I'd take it kindly if you don't talk too much about what you've seen an' heard tonight. I'll stop by the hotel on my way out of town an' tell Deems an' Kitty not to say very much. I reckon they'll be glad to keep the whole thing quiet."

"You mean about—Sam?"

"Yeah."

"But if you're going to bring him back—"

There was a little silence while the two men finished tying on the bedroll behind Pat's saddle. Then Morgan said, "I don't blame you none, Pat. Whatever you do, I'll keep things mighty quiet here."

Pat said, "Thanks." He went to the hitching post and untied his horse's reins. Morgan came to stand beside him, and Pat held out his hand. "I got a lot of thinkin' to do," he said slowly. "I dunno, Harold, what's right an' what isn't."

"You want I should stay deputized and keep hold of things till you get back?"

"If I come back." Pat's voice was low and brooding. He drew the reins over his horse's neck.

"Do you mean—"Morgan's voice was also low.

"I don't know what I mean," Pat said savagely. "I swear to God, I don't know. How can I come back if I don't bring Sam back with me? I'll be worse than him, Morgan. You know I will. I'm the sheriff an' there's been two murders in Dutch Springs tonight." He put his foot in the stirrup and lifted his body into the saddle.

Harold Morgan stood by the hitching post and watched him ride away. He was sorry as hell for Pat Stevens. Like Pat said, how did a man know where his duty lay when friendship was involved?

Pat trotted slowly up Main Street, past the Gold Eagle and on to the Jewel Hotel. He had a funny feeling in his stomach as he rode past the familiar buildings. This might be the last time he'd ride down the main street of Dutch Springs. Tomorrow, men might curse the name of Pat Stevens as a betrayer of their trust. The same men who tonight were his best friends.

He stopped his horse in front of the hotel and got off heavily. In the lobby, he stopped at the desk and asked Tom Forrest: "What did Miss Kitty an' Joe do tonight after I run out after the bank robbers?"

OLD TOM shook his head and frowned. "I dunno, Sheriff. I run out the door, too, an' stayed out while the shootin' was goin' on back of the bank. By Gosh, Pat," he went on eagerly, "what's goin' on upstairs? Won't nobody tell me nothin'."

Pat said, "There's a dead man up in Kitty's room." He turned away from the desk and went to the door leading into the saloon.

Kitty Lane and Joe Deems were standing with their heads close together near the bar. Kitty saw Pat, and he beckoned to them.

"You find out anything from Jeth Purdue?" Joe asked eagerly as he approached with Kitty.

Pat shook his head. "Purdue ain't talkin'." He paused a moment, then asked Kitty harshly, "Just what did you say about fixin' things with Purdue when you talked to Ezra?"

She wet her lips nervously and avoided his boring gaze. "I don't know exactly. I begged him not to worry too much. Told him I thought maybe Jeth would help us."

"Did you tell him you'd talk to Jeth?"

"I don't know. I can't remember what I said, I was so excited and frightened."

Pat sighed and asked, "How much have either of you told anyone about things?"

"Nothing," Deems said quickly. "We thought we'd let you handle it."

"Good. The less you talk about things for awhile, the better it'll come out. I'm leavin' Harold Mor-

gan in charge. He'll bring the undertaker up for the body pretty soon. All anybody has to know is that the man is dead. Let 'em think he stabbed himself."

Kitty put her hand on his arm. She breathed, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm ridin' after Sam an' Ezra—alone."

"You're not—you're not going to —?" she faltered.

Pat's face remained inscrutable. "I don't reckon anybody knows what they'll do till the time comes, Ma'am. There's one more thing. I never did finish searchin' through your bureau after I found out you were Mrs. Ralston."

Kitty flinched at mention of the name. But she said bravely, "You're welcome to finish searching now if you want."

"I reckon I'd better. You want to go up with me to make sure I don't steal nothing?"

"Of course not." Kitty laughed shortly. "Go right ahead." She turned and went back to the bar.

The door of Kitty's room stood open and the lamp was still lit. The body of Fred Ralston had not been touched. Pat stood on the threshold for a moment, then went to the bureau to which his attention had been directed by Joe Deems, and pulled out the second drawer.

There were neatly folded handkerchiefs with perfumed sachets between them, and many other dainty articles of feminine underclothing, which brought a slow blush to Pat's sunburned face as he poked among them awkwardly with a hard forefinger.

He closed that drawer with a sigh of relief after finding nothing. The bottom drawer held a heavy-stayed corset and several pairs of slippers, along with several pairs of very thin and very long (it seemed to Pat's uninitiated eyes) pairs of lady's stockings.

He felt around the drawer dubiously, and then pushed it shut with a sigh of relief. He straightened up and mopped sweat from his face, wondered irritably what the hell he was looking for anyway.

YET, somehow, he was loath to leave the deathroom. He had an uneasy feeling that he hadn't done all a sheriff should, that he might be overlooking an important clue.

He moved around the room slowly, scratching his head and looking in the corners and under the bed. He finally went into number 15, carrying the lighted lamp from Kitty's room, and dumped out the contents of Fred Ralston's suitcase in the middle of the bed.

He had been a mighty dudish dresser, all right. Right down to his skin. Silk underclothes, by golly, and bright colored socks and ties. Even a little thing that squirted sweet-smelling perfume when you pressed a rubber bulb.

But there wasn't any writing in the suitcase, not a single thing that Pat recognized as a clue except the evidence of the dead man's dudish taste in clothes. Pat even looked in the empty bureau drawers and the clothes closet, but it was evident that Ralston hadn't done any unpacking whatsoever.

That fact, in itself, Pat mused, might be a clue. Generally, when a man checked in at a hotel, the first thing he did was to unpack his suitcase. But Ralston hadn't taken a single article from his bag. It almost looked like he knew that death was planned for him, and hadn't thought it worthwhile to unpack.

Pat pondered over that theory for a time, but in the end had to discard it. No man would plan his own death, though he knew definitely that Ralston did have some plot up his sleeve when he got off the stage in Dutch Springs.

Pat sighed and picked up the lamp and went back into the room with the dead man. There were a lot of questions that had to wait until he caught up with Sam and Ezra, and he could only hope that they would have the answers for him.

He set the lighted lamp down on the bureau and turned for one more final survey of the room. His gaze

lighted on the bottle of whisky, and he realized that he could use another drink before starting the ride to his ranch. The thought of going into one of the bars didn't appeal to him because he knew the questions that would inevitably be asked.

He picked up the bottle and took another drink from it, set it down carefully and recorked it.

His gaze was caught by a strip of sheer white cloth hanging half in and half out of a metal wastebasket by the side of the oilcloth-covered washstand.

He moved over slowly and stooped down to pick it up. His gray eyes narrowed as he recognized the top portion of a lady's white lisle stocking. There was a little black clock along it, with an arrow pointing upward, considered very daring and sporting in the West.

The foot of the stocking had been cut off with a pair of scissors at a point well above the ankle.

Pat frowned down at the gauzy material in his hands, wondering why any woman would ruin an expensive stocking like that by cutting off the foot. He examined it closely, found that it was quite a new stocking, perhaps never even worn.

He carried it back to the bureau and pulled out the lower drawer again, began poking dubiously among the other stockings he had seen there previously. Most of them were black, either of cotton lace or sheer lisle. There was only one other pair of white stockings in the drawer.

Then Pat's eyes glinted at sight of a small ball of white lisle rolled up and tucked back in one corner of the drawer. He shook it out, found it to be the exact twin of the stocking he held in his hand except that it still had the foot attached. And he had been right about the other piece. The whole stocking was in perfect condition, certainly had not been worn more than a few times.

This puzzled Pat more than ever. He knew enough about women's clothing to know that such stockings were quite expensive, and that the ruining of one stocking meant that a pair had been ruined.

Why had Kitty Lane cut the foot off an expensive stocking?

Pat Stevens didn't know, but he had a feeling that the answer might be important.

He stuffed the cut-off stocking in a pocket of his jacket and put its unharmed mate back in the drawer and closed it. Then he went out and downstairs to take the road northeastward toward the Lazy Mare ranch where his wife would be waiting for him.

CHAPTER IX

RIDING east from Dutch Springs, Pat Stevens pulled his horse up at the crossroads where he had sent the posse in the wrong direction earlier in the evening. He hesitated there for a time, his face bleak and uncertain. He finally shook his head and turned his horse in the same direction the posse had ridden. His ranch lay along that road. It was too late, now, to hope to overtake Sam Sloan and Ezra on the southern road. Better to ride on home and change horses prepare for a long trail ride. He knew where Sam and Ezra would head for. Just as well as though he were with them, he knew how their minds would work, the trails they would choose in riding south from Powder Valley.

He could cut straight down across country from the Lazy Mare ranch and it would be a shorter ride than from here at the crossroads to a point where he could cross their trail.

The lumpy moon was high in the heavens, now, casting a golden glow down upon the peaceful valley, limning remembered landmarks to Pat as he rode along at a slow lope.

Everything that he saw in the bright moonlight, all the memories they brought to him, seemed to hold a special significance to Pat on this homeward ride tonight. For, though he refused to give it place in the forefront of his thoughts, there rode with him the realization that he might never look upon these familiar things again.

He kept putting the thought away from him, but he could not put away

the depressed mood that gripped him. He wasn't sorry for what he had done back in Kitty's room in the Jewel Hotel, and in the back door of the bank building. He was merely sorry that it had been necessary for him to do those things. He didn't blame Sam and Ezra for what had happened. They, too, had become enmeshed in a tangle of circumstances that had forced them to act as they had.

The dull rumble of many horses' hooves approaching him from the road ahead brought Pat's thoughts back to reality with a jerk. He stiffened in the saddle, and his features settled into grim lines as he realized that must be the posse returning from a hard and fruitless ride.

He saw them soon in the moonlight, a close-packed group of riders moving at the slow trot of thoroughly winded horses. He pulled up in front of them and signaled out Mark Johnson to ask, "Any luck, Mark?"

"Not a damn bit, Pat. Didn't see hide nor hair of that critter though we rode the legs off some of our hawses. You shore he went this way, Pat?"

"I don't make many mistakes on a thing like that," Pat reminded him curtly.

"I know you don't." Johnson lifted his hat and doubtfully scratched his head. "Mighta turned off some place, I reckon. But we looked for signs an' never saw none. What's doin' back in town that kep' you from ridin' with us?"

"Plenty." Pat hesitated, reminding himself that they would find out soon enough anyhow. "Two killin's."

"Two killings?" The members of the posse began to cluster around him excitedly. "Who was it? Howcome? Who done it?"

"A dude from Denver. Got knifed up in the Jewel Hotel. An' Jeth Purdue. He got it while I had him locked up in jail."

"You had Jeth Purdue locked up?"

"That's right. I ain't got time to explain it all now," Pat went on swiftly. "I locked Jeth up because I figured he had somethin' to do with the other killin'."

"You reckon it was the same feller held up the bank, Pat?"

"I ain't rightly sure. But I'm takin' out after 'em. An' you can tell the people in town that Pat Stevens promises 'em he'll have the money stole from the bank when he comes back."

"You got a line on 'em, Pat? You know where to go?"

"I got a line on 'em. And I'm goin' alone." Pat spurred his horse and slowly pushed through the group of riders.

They didn't hold him back for any more questions. Pat Stevens' word was good with those men and they were willing to let him ride on alone if that was the way he wanted it.

Pat put his horse to a steady lope after he left the posse behind him. His body was slumped in the saddle, welded to the easy movement of his mount. He met no one along the road, held the same even pace until a light in the front window of his ranch house came into view.

THE sight of that lighted window brought a lump into Pat Steven's throat. It meant that Sally was waiting up for him, as she had so often waited up for his return in the turbulent past. He dreaded what he had to tell her tonight. Not that Sally wouldn't understand. She always understood. That was what amazed and humbled Pat. In the past, he'd made the mistake of trying to hide things from her, things that he thought a woman would be happier not knowing. Always, though, she had managed to get the truth from him somehow, and he'd always been glad in the end that she had.

He slowed his horse to a trot, and headed down past the big barn and corrals to the unlighted bunkhouse. Pat was not the kind of a rancher who expected a hired man to care for his horse when he came in, but tonight was different. He had a lot of things to do, and he'd already wasted too much time.

He swung off at the door of the bunkhouse, opened it and called in a low voice, "Anybody awake?"

"Yeah. That you, boss?" a young voice responded almost instantly.

"Curly?"

"Yeah. It's me, Pat. Somethin' wrong?"

"I've got some hard ridin' to do," Pat said quietly. "Wish you'd get up an' help me, Curly."

"You bet." There was a creak of bedsprings. "What you want I should do?"

"Unsaddle this hawse an' turn him in the corral. Then catch out—lemme see, Curly—is that big roan in the corral tonight?"

"Big Red? Yeh. He ain't been rode for a week. You want him saddled?"

"Sure do, Curly. An' pick out a good lead hawse to go along. One that'll trail with a pack-saddle an' carry me if I have to change. Throw a pack-saddle on him an' tie on that bedroll behind my saddle. Then gather me up some campin' stuff, Curly, a frypan an' coffee pot—not much, but enough to keep me goin' a few days. I'll bring down some grub from the house an' be ready to pull out in half an hour."

"Look, boss. If you want some company—"

"Nope. I'm ridin' alone, Curly."

Pat turned and strode away from the bunkhouse, up the gentle slope leading to the pleasant ranch house which Sally had turned into a real home during the ten years they had lived there.

Sally jumped up from a low rocking chair by the huge stone fireplace when Pat opened the door. She spilled some sewing out of her lap onto the floor, but disregarded it as she turned to smile at Pat.

Her years of marriage had been kind to Sally Stevens. Her hair was still bright golden, and her eyes danced as eagerly at sight of her husband as those of a young girl might dance at sight of her lover. Her face was unlined, a little fuller than when Pat first met her, and much more beautiful. The slim, girlish slenderness of her body had rounded into soft maturity with the passing years, but her step was elastic as she came toward him holding out both hands, and her voice was vibrant and strong. "I almost went to sleep by the fire waiting for you, darling. What kept you so long in town?"

Pat tossed his hat on a chair and caught his wife up in his arms. He put his cheek against her golden hair and muttered, "Gosh, you smell good, Sally. No perfume neither."

She twisted away from him, laughing gaily. "What would I want with perfume? Soap and water is best."

He said, "Some folks think they need perfume," and went past her to poke a smoldering log into flame in the big fireplace.

"I've got some hot cookies in the warming oven. And I'll get a glass of cold milk. We'll have a little party, darling, to celebrate your becoming a private citizen again."

WARMING his hands over the fire, Pat said, "Hot cookies will taste mighty good, Sally. But, how about coffee instead of cold milk."

"You know coffee keeps you awake, Pat."

Without turning from the fire, he said gently, "That's why I want coffee tonight, old lady."

Sally paled a trifle and caught her under lip between white teeth. When Pat called her "old lady" in that gentle tone, she knew she was going to dread what he was going to tell her. She started to reply, then shook her bright head resolutely and said, "All right. I'll put the coffee pot right on."

She went into the kitchen quietly and began to put kindling on the hot coals in the big wooden range. Pat waited until she had left the living room, then went through another door into the rear bedroom they occupied together and lifted his saddle gun in its leather boot down from a nail in the wall.

He carried it back into the living room and pulled the short rifle from its leather sheath, was examining the loading mechanism carefully when Sally reentered the room.

She stopped in the doorway, and her eyes filled with fright when she saw what her husband was doing. She

hesitated a moment, then came forward with a forced smile on her lips. "What is it, Pat? I thought you'd be done with night-riding when you turned your sheriff's badge over to Jeth Purdue."

Satisfied that the carbine was in perfect condition, Pat restored it to the leather boot. He said, "I've still got my badge." He reached in his shirt pocket and pulled it out, let his eyes brood down on it. It seemed to him that it didn't shine as brightly as it had earlier in the evening, as though the insensate metal itself had somehow become tarnished by what he had done that night.

Sally's eyes dilated when she saw the badge. She asked sharply, "Why didn't you give it to Mr Purdue as you planned?"

Pat said, "Jeth Purdue is dead." He slowly slid the badge back in his pocket.

"Dead?" Sally reached out to catch hold of his arm. "Tell me, Pat. Something dreadful has happened."

"Pretty bad." He nodded. "Wait'll you bring the coffee an' cookies in, Sally. Then I'll tell you all about it when we're settled."

As she turned to go back into the kitchen, he raised his voice to add, "An' you might be gettin' a little chuck together, old lady. A piece of sow-belly an' some beans. Coffee an' flour an' sugar. Enough to last a few days, maybe."

She said, "All right, Pat," and her voice did not falter though she was amazed to find she could speak past the burning lump that was choking her.

Pat sat down at a small table in front of the fireplace and pulled up the right leg of his pants above the top of his boot. He reached inside and drew out the knife that had murdered Fred Ralston, laid it on the table and unrolled it from its towel wrapping. The firelight glinted evilly on the red stains of a dead man's blood on the sharp blade. He stared at the knife for a moment, then pushed it back, leaving it in plain sight on top of the towel.

Sally came hurrying in with a platter of sugar cookies. As she placed them in front of Pat, she gave a horrified exclamation. "Why that's Sam's hunting knife. All covered with blood."

PAT said, "That's part of what I've got to tell you, Sally." He picked up a warm sugar cooky and bit into it.

Sally went slowly back to the kitchen without asking any questions. Pat thoughtfully munched the cooky and licked the crumbs from his fingers, then turned to stare into the firelight while he rolled a cigarette.

He could hear Sally moving around briskly in the kitchen, getting together the few necessities he would need for a few days' pack-trip.

She came in presently and set a partially filled gunny sack down near the front door. She said composedly, "There are all the things you'll need," and went back to the kitchen.

When she returned next time she brought two cups and a big iron coffee pot with her. The pot was steaming, and exuding the invigorating odor of strong coffee. She filled two cups and set the pot on the hearth near the coals to keep warm, then sat down opposite Pat and said, "You'd better tell me all about it."

"It all started when a dude got off the evening stage from Denver." Pat took a sip of hot coffee, then went on with a straightforward and completely truthful account of the events of the evening, omitting none of the facts, offering no excuses for his own conduct, laying the entire affair in front of his wife for her own clear judgment.

Sally listened to him without comment. She sat very still for a full minute after he finished. Then she said softly, "Poor Sam—and Ezra."

"I've got to go after them, Sally."

"To arrest Sam for killing a man—when you can see it was a put-up job?"

"Not that so much, Sally. There's the money they stole from the bank."

"Are you sure it was Ezra you saw? It was dark in the bank," she reminded him. "Mightn't you be mistaken?"

"No. It was Ezra. The crazy galoot!" Pat went on angrily. "What'd he do that for? Stealin' money that me an' all the rest of the folks in the Valley have trusted in the bank! He shouldn't have done that."

"He was bewildered and frightened, Pat. You know how Ezra is. He was dead-set on getting Sam out of danger. And I suppose their money was in the bank, too. He didn't want to go off and leave that."

"I've got to get it back," Pat told her heavily. "I just the same as helped 'em steal it when I shot over Ezra's head to warn him so he could get away. An' then I sent the posse scootin' off on the wrong road. But I don't see what else I could do, Sally. I couldn't let 'em get caught robbin' the bank. Not with that dead man back there too. I had to help 'em get away—an' now I've got to get that money back."

"Do you think they killed Jeth Purdue also?"

"I don't know," Pat confessed. "I don't know what I think. They might've. You know how that red-headed Ezra is when he gets riled up. What do you make of it, Sally?" he appealed to her. "What do you reckon Ralston had planned with Kitty an' Purdue when he came to town? That's what I don't understand."

"At least you know it was some scheme to get Sam and Ezra's money from them," she told him with spirit. "Whatever it was, Sam must have seen through it. He and Ralston got in a fight and Sam killed him."

"That's not the way Kitty told it."

"Kitty?" Sally laughed scornfully and tossed her bright head. "That woman! Do you think the truth could be in a woman like her?"

"You don't know her, Sally."

"I know her kind. Singing and dancing in the saloons with men!"

"I don't know. I'd like you should meet her. Damn if I didn't feel sorry for her."

"You men are all alike. Just because a woman is pretty and goes around half-dressed."

"If it was like you think," Pat argued, "if they were trying to get Sam's money an' he killed Ralston for that—why did Ezra get him out of town so fast, and rob the bank to boot? Why didn't they just stay an' tell the truth? No jury would blame Sam for killin' a man that way."

SALLY wrinkled her smooth forehead and shook her head. "I don't know," she confessed. "Except that you know Ezra isn't terribly bright. If Sam did pass out like Kitty said—that must be it, Pat. Don't you see? Ezra wasn't in there. He doesn't know what happened. Only what Kitty told him. And she made it look bad for Sam—told Ezra her husband had come in and caught them together and Sam had murdered him in cold blood. Not knowing anything about what the fight was really about, Ezra believed her."

"Yeah," Pat agreed thoughtfully, "that might be it, all right. But, what about Jeth? Shootin' him that way through the jail window looks mighty bad."

"I don't know but I'll bet there's some explanation," Sally said stoutly. "You'll find out when you talk with them."

"I hope so." Pat finished his cup of coffee and cleared his throat. "You know—if there ain't some good explanation like that—I won't be ridin' back this way, honey."

"You won't—be riding back home?" she choked out

"How can I, honey? I'm not goin' to bring 'em back if it means a hangin'. You know I can't do that. Not to Sam and Ezra."

"No," she whispered. "I guess not."

"You know not, Sally. I can't judge my friend. If it means them takin' the owl-hoot trail—well, I reckon it means the same for me."

"But why, Pat? Why couldn't you come back?"

"Because I'd never be able to look any man in Powder Valley in the face again," he told her sternly. "You can see that, Sally. I'm sheriff. If I let a murderer go because he's my friend, I'm just as guilty as him."

"But what about the bank money? You said you'd get it back."

"And I will. I'll find a way to send it back if things turn out wrong. I'm sorry, honey." Pat's voice wasn't very steady. "But that's the way it looks to me."

Sally got up and poured more coffee. Her eyes shone softly in the firelight. "Before I ever married you," she reminded him, "I chose to go with you when it looked like you were turning against the law. Things haven't changed any since then—except that I guess I love you a lot more."

Pat choked over a sip of hot coffee. "You mean—"

"I mean that I'll join you wherever you go," she told him steadily. "You have to do what you think is right. I want you to. But, oh! Isn't all this dreadful, Pat? And Sam was going to begin his new job tomorrow, wasn't he? Riding the Pony Express mail route."

"Yeh. Sam was lookin' forward to that like a kid at Christmas time." Pat turned the coffee cup round and round in his hands and kept his eyes lowered. "There's one other thing I ain't told you yet. I got a sort of clue. I reckon you might call it."

"A clue? What kind?"

PAT reached in his jacket pocket and awkwardly drew out the upper length of white lisle stocking. He blushed as he dropped it on the table in front of his wife. "See what you make of it?"

"Why it's a stocking. Part of one. It's beautiful." Sally's fingers caressed the soft sheer material. "Where did you get this, Pat?"

"In Miss Kitty's room."

"Oh! It's hers. But why is part of it cut off?"

"That's what I wondered," Pat mumbled. "Thought maybe you'd know why a woman'd cut the foot of a pretty stocking like that."

Sally's fingers continued to caress the material. "I never had a nice one like this. If I did have, I certainly wouldn't cut them up. They cost an awful lot, Pat. I've seen them in mail-order catalogs."

"The mate to this'n is in her drawer," Pat told her, his face reddening again. "The bottom drawer of her bureau," he added hastily as if that was important. "It ain't hurt a bit."

Sally shook her head and looked mystified. "I don't see what kind of a clue it is."

"I don't either. Not yet." Pot got up and picked up his rifle. He tried to be casual as he said, "Well, old lady, I guess I better be moseyin' along. When Dock wakes up in the mornin' tell him that I'm out huntin' bank robbers. No need for him to know the truth—yet."

"I'll tell him," Sally promised in a steady voice. She got up and took her husband's arm, walked to the door with him. "You takin' a packhorse?"

"Yeh. Curly's getting him packed." Pat stooped and picked up the gunny sack of food Sally had fixed for him to take along. "I'll let you know—soon's I can," he promised.

Sally stood on tiptoe and put her soft rounded arms about his neck. She smiled into his eyes and pressed her lips against his. "Fix a place for me, Pat, if you don't come back." Her voice was almost inaudible.

He said, "I will, honey." His arm tightened about her briefly, then he turned and strode away down to the corral.

Sally leaned against the door frame and watched his tall figure disappear in the misty moonlight. Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks now. She didn't care. Once more she had triumphed, sending Pat out into danger with a smile and a kiss—holding back the tears until he could no longer see her.

CHAPTER X

THE big roan gelding had an eager, springy stride; and he tossed his head and snorted impatiently as Pat held him to a trot along the creek trail leading eastward from the ranch. The bay mare, laden with a pack-saddle, trotted along

docilely at the end of a short lead rope. Like Pat, she was a veteran of many long rides and she had long ago learned to conserve her strength at the beginning to have a reserve left at the end.

At the right of the creek-bed, low foothills rose upward toward the jagged peaks of a mountain range beyond. Knowing the entire country as he knew the palm of his hand, Pat planned to cut sharply south through those foothills on an old abandoned ranch road that swung westward along the base of the higher mountains until it struck the main road south from Powder Valley near a point where the main road began to climb through one of the few passes leading over the mountains.

He didn't hope to reach that pass before Sam and Ezra, if it was their objective, but he could learn from a rancher near the foot of the pass whether the fugitives had passed that way, and would then know how to plan the chase.

If they did strike due south over the high mountain pass, it would be a difficult matter to overhaul them. Pat knew they would be well mounted, and they were two of the best horsemen in Colorado. That's why Pat had taken time to ride home and pick up a fresh horse and a lead animal. If the ride developed into a long chase, this would give him a terrific advantage over the two fleeing men with only one mount apiece. Tired horses have to be rested and fed, and hard-riding men have to eat. With his camping equipment and his extra mount, Pat was positive he could overtake his friends within a couple of days if they headed down into New Mexico.

On the other hand, they were likely to realize their handicap in a straightaway ride, and turn off the main road before they reached the pass. In that event, Pat knew pretty well where to look for them, for the trio had ridden all that mountainous country together in years past, and Pat was familiar with every trail known to the other two.

What they did depended largely on whether they expected Pat to take out after them or not. Without Pat on their trail, he knew they'd feel fairly safe in turning westward off the main road and making their way at a leisurely pace toward another little-known pass far to the west and thence on to the Border. There were isolated range cabins scattered along that route where they could safely hole up for days at a time, and devious back trails where they were unlikely to meet any riders.

What would Sam and Ezra expect him to do? That was a problem that caused Pat to knit his brows fretfully as he rode on at a brisk pace through the night. He tried to put himself in their place. The way that farewell note had been worded, it didn't sound as though Ezra thought he would try to follow them.

But they knew him well enough, Pat reasoned, to realize he'd feel duty-bound to ride on the trail of money stolen from the bank. Again, he realized that they didn't know Ezra had been recognized as the bank robber. He was certain Ezra did not know it was Pat who fired those warning shots over his head in the bank doorway. So they probably felt safe enough on that score. They knew Pat wouldn't bring them back for a hanging, no matter what they had done.

IT WAS all pretty much mixed up, and Pat gave up trying to untangle it after a time. When he reached the foot of the pass, he'd know which course they had chosen. Until that time, any speculation was utterly useless.

The monotonous thudding of hooves and the even motion of the roan lulled Pat's thoughts into a sort of drowsy lethargy after a time. He gladly welcomed the surcease from active thought. He'd done too damn much thinking without getting anywhere already. There were too many things he didn't know about the whole setup. He wasn't used to dealing with men like Ralston and Deems. He couldn't figure them out. For the life of him, he couldn't see what they had in mind when Fred Ralston came on from Denver. He tried to recall

exactly what Ralston had said, thinking he was talking to Jeth Purdue, but his best recollection didn't make any real sense.

There'd been some sort of plan to get hold of Sam and Ezra's money, but that's all the sense Pat could make out of it. It was quite evident that the plan had miscarried somehow, and Ralston's death had resulted. He still couldn't see for the life of him why Jeth Purdue had been killed. Ezra might have committed the act in a sudden fit of rage. There was a ruthless streak in the big one-eyed man that showed up sometimes when he became very angry. His reactions were almost childlike when it came to matters of right and wrong.

If Ezra honestly felt that Jeth Purdue needed to be killed, he'd be capable of doing the job just as he would calmly put a bullet in the head of a crazed coyote—or a beloved horse who'd broken his leg and had to be put out of pain.

It might not be right according to civilized standards, but Pat had always had a lot of difficulty making Sam and Ezra believe in civilized standards. He'd never been able to make them see that it was best to bring a criminal to trial for his acts. In their forthright way, they believed that the best way to dispose of a guilty man was to shoot him at the first opportunity; an efficient method of keeping order, but a little bit old-fashioned even for Powder Valley.

In this way, Pat's thoughts went around in ceaseless circles as though they were inside a vacuum while he dozed in the saddle.

The roan had gotten rid of his coltish ideas after a few miles on the old ranch road, and had settled down to a steady and seemingly tireless lope which put distance behind him at an amazing rate.

When Pat finally shook himself out of his drowsiness and sat up in the saddle to look around, he was surprised and pleased to see that dawn was already beginning to break over the rough foothill country through which he rode.

There was a faint red glow in the cloudless eastern sky, and nearby objects were beginning to emerge from the enveloping dark that had come when the moon disappeared behind the high peaks on the western horizon.

Pat stared around him thoughtfully for a time, trying to place his exact position on the old road. His direction, now, was a little south of west, which meant that he was veering around the base of the southern mountains and was only a few miles from meeting the main southern highway which Sam and Ezra had taken out of Dutch Springs.

Daylight came on with amazing speed in the high country after the night-blackness reluctantly gave way to dawn. The red blush spread swiftly over the sky, deepening to violent crimson near the horizon and sending out lances of yellow as the sun moved up to the very rim of the world.

Then there was a blazing ball of fire, and the tall feathery tops of pine trees caught the flame of a new day. His horses tossed their heads approvingly and moved a little faster as the smell of water came to them, and Pat quickly decided to stop for a brief breakfast when they reached the small stream ahead.

He was really in no great hurry. If Sam and Ezra had followed the southern road this far, they would already be well up on the pass; and if they had swung off westward as he suspected, he would surely be able to come up to them by nightfall. In either case, Pat knew it was smart to break his ride into short stages, with a brief rest and feed for both himself and horses before either became too weary to keep up the pace.

HE REINED off the road under a pair of aged cottonwood trees on the bank of a gurgling stream, and swung out of the saddle lightly. He loosened the girth and pulled the heavy rig off, stripped the blanket from the sweaty roan and looped a rope about his neck. He pulled the bridle off and gave him a slap on the haunches to send him trotting down to the stream for a drink, then went back to the patient bay and slid the

pack saddle off her back. He tethered both horses where they could get water and graze in the lush grass along the stream, then built a tiny fire of dry sticks gathered along the bank, carefully laid on larger sticks to build up a bed of coals and took his smoke-stained coffee pot to the stream above the horses and filled it half-full of clear water only a few degrees above the freezing point.

He threw a man-sized handful of coffee into the pot and placed it on the fire with burning sticks piled up around it, cut two thick slices of fat salt pork from the slab Sally had provided, and put them on the fire in the frying pan with a small quantity of water to boil out the excess salt before frying. There were cold biscuits in the gunny sack to complete his breakfast, and Pat squatted on one heel to roll and light a cigarette while the sow-belly boiled gently and the coffee pot began sending out its appetizing aroma.

After he'd smoked one cigarette, he poured the water off his fat meat and put it back on the fire to fry. The coffee was boiling merrily, so he raked a few glowing coals to one side of the fire and set the pot on them to simmer and settle, then began turning his meat with a long-handled fork.

Not more than twenty minutes after he had reined aside under the cottonwoods, Pat was munching a cold biscuit with a slice of crisp pork between the halves, and washing it down with huge drafts of strong, steaming coffee.

And not more than forty minutes had elapsed in all when he was back in the saddle with his few camp things again packed securely on the bay mare, headed westward to the junction with the southern road.

He didn't bother to try to read any trail signs when he reached the road an hour later. Too many riders rode this route to make it feasible to try to pick out the tracks of any single pair. The ranch of Lon Estis was only a two-hour ride up the pass, and wtih the road running right through Estis's yard it was impossible for anyone to pass that way without being seen.

Lon came out of his barn to greet Pat Stevens when the sheriff got off to open his back gate two hours later. Lon Estis was a big man with a sweeping black mustache and a completely bald head. He looked appraisingly at the dust-streaked roan and the packed saddle mare, and drawled out, "'Pears you figger on makin' a long ride, Sheriff."

Pat said, "That's what you're goin' to decide for me. Heard anything about the trouble in town last night?"

"The bank robbin'?" Lon Estis nodded placidly and backed up to a fence post to scratch his back. "Harry Tyler rode past 'bout an hour after sun-up. Said there was sure hell a-poppin'."

"Anybody else pass before Harry?"

"Well, now, I don't reckon so, Pat. I wasn't up till most daylight, but I didn't hear Jigger barkin' none durin' thuh night. An' Jigger never misses wakin' me when anybody rides through."

Pat knew Jigger was Lon's dog, a huge, rough-haired brute counted one of the finest watchdogs in the entire Valley. Pat nodded his relief and said, "I reckon maybe it won't be such a long ride then, if no one rode through."

"Harry tol' me 'bout the posse losin' that feller," Lon said. "Seems like there was a killin' or two in town, too, wasn't there?"

"Two of 'em," Pat said curtly.

"They tell me you're still wearin' the sheriff's badge, Pat. You on the trail of something?"

"I will be," Pat told him briefly, "after I've rode back a ways. I figure they turned off west."

"Know who they be?"

"I've got a good idea." Pat met Lon's inquiring eyes squarely.

LON nodded and picked up a twig and began chewing on it. It was evident to him that Pat didn't wish to discuss either the bank robbery or the murders. After a brief period of mastication he said earnestly, "I'm shore lookin' for'rd to that

Pony Express comin' through here. Gonna be sorta less lonesome-like."

Pat roused himself from his thoughts to say, "There'll be a station not so far down the road from here, I reckon."

"'Bout five miles. They got change-stations scattered every ten miles 'tween El Paso an' Denver, they tell me. This'n down the road," he added casually, "is the one Ezra's gonna have charge of. An' Sam Sloan'll be ridin' the ten miles into Dutch Springs an' back ever' day."

Pat looked at the rancher sharply to see if his mention of Sam and Ezra carried any knowledge of the part they had played in last night's affair, but he could get no hint from the impassive expression with which Estis met his glance.

Pat said, "Sam ought to make a good Express rider. He don't weigh but a hundred an' twenty soakin' wet."

"Yeh. Sam'll do good," Lon agreed.

Pat squatted down and picked up a short piece of stick. A vague idea was beginning to come to him. He thoughtfully formed some brands in the soft ground with the piece of stick. A Lazy J and a Flying T. Then he made a B Bar B, and put wings on both of the B's. Lon Estis watched him with casual interest.

"Some folks in Dutch Springs," Pat said finally, "have got an idea Sam ain't going to ride the mail today."

"That so?" Lon looked surprised. "Sam sick?"

"No. It ain't that." Pat dropped his stick and rolled a cigarette. "Just some things that Sam's said, I reckon. Or done."

"That so?"

Pat nodded. "Would you do me a favor, Lon?"

"You bet. Want me to saddle out a hawse an' ride with you after them robbers?"

Pat shook his head. "I'm takin' care of that myself. You figurin' on going into Dutch Springs any time today?"

"Well, now, I could, I reckon." Lon rubbed his chin, regarding Pat soberly. "I'm sorta short on tobaccy."

"If you do ride in," said Pat carefully, "I wish you'd tell folks you talked with me this mornin.'"

"Shore, I'll do that. Anything else special?"

"Yes. I'm tellin' you flat that Sam Sloan's gonna ride the mail this afternoon. Don't make no mistake about that. An' I'd like mighty well to have that piece of news spread around Dutch Springs good, so ever'one will know it."

"Sam's gonna ride the mail?" Lon Estis repeated in a tone of perplexity. "Awright, Pat, I'll scatter the word around."

"Don't say I told you particular to tell it. Just say we were talkin' an' you mentioned something about hearin' he wouldn't make that first Express ride, an' how I rose up on my hind legs and said he would." Pat's voice was quietly emphatic.

"I got you, I reckon. What-for-you want that told in town?"

Pat looked at him squarely. "Do you trust me to know what I'm doin'?"

"Shore I do."

"All right. I'd rather you didn't ask no questions. Just tell that where it'll get scattered around town good. In at the Gold Eagle, an' up to the Jewel. Kitty Lane would like mighty well to know it, I reckon."

Lon grinned broadly. "They do say Sam's got a real case on Kitty."

Pat grunted a noncommittal, "U-m-m." He got up and stretched. "I better be ridin' if I'm goin' to get that bank money back."

"You shore you know what you're doin', Pat? Goin' it alone?"

"I'll make out. An' thanks, Lon." Pat went out the back gate and closed it, mounted his roan and started back at a fast trot along the road leading down to the foot of the steep pass.

CHAPTER XI

PAT did a lot of intensive thinking while he rode back to a point where he could turn off the road westward. The fact that Sam and Ezra had not crossed the pass convinced him that they did not expect to be followed by him. They

must have heard the posse go past the crossroads in the wrong direction, he reasoned, and felt they were reasonably safe from pursuit.

Thus, they wouldn't have ridden too fast, and probably planned to hole up during the daylight hours and do most of their riding at night; taking it by easy stages to the other pass and over the mountains to the Mexican Border.

They had had practically the entire night to make their first ride. That meant, maybe thirty miles—forty at the most. And Ezra was a mighty big hunk of human flesh for any horse to carry fast or far. Thirty miles would be more like it. Maybe less, if Sam remained dead drunk very long and had to be tied in the saddle.

That meant they couldn't have reached a point more than ten or fifteen miles west of the road by the time sunup caught them. And that would take them just about to the old Windrow range cabin standing high and desolate on the northern slope of the mountain.

Pat nodded with satisfaction when his reasoning took him to that point. The Windrow line cabin was just about it. Sam and Ezra would have thought of it at once, for it afforded an almost perfect stopping point for the dangerous daylight hours. Situated high on the mountain slope, the only way of approach was by the front and it gave down on a clear vista in that direction for almost two miles. There was a mountain spring just behind the cabin, and plenty of feed for their horses. There was always a supply of canned goods and a stack of firewood inside the cabin for any stray rider who chanced to get caught by darkness in that vicinity; and Sam and Ezra knew that because they, with Pat, had made several overnight stops at the cabin in past years.

Having definitely decided that the Windrow cabin would have been the fugitives' objective, Pat began watching for the first favorable chance to turn off the road in that direction. He knew the point Sam and Ezra would have selected, several miles ahead, but by cutting a little north of due west he could cross their route and save several precious miles.

The descent was quite steep, winding sharply down the heavily wooded mountainside, but when presently it was cut by a shallow valley, Pat turned off the road without hesitation. The valley led almost due west, dropping downward at an easy grade, and flattening out after a few miles into a wide grassy park stretching northward for many miles toward Dutch Springs.

Pat reined his roan down to a slow trot as he started across the open park at an angle. If his calculations were correct, Sam and Ezra would have had to cross this same park to reach the Windrow cabin, coming in from the northeast.

The grass had been grazed to a short stubble by hungry cattle during the past season, giving a rider a fair chance to discern any fresh hoofprints he might come upon.

Pat leaned far forward in the saddle, resting his right forearm on the roan's neck and searching the ground carefully while he held to the slow pace. Luckily, there were no horses pastured here and the only tracks were those left by the cleft hooves of cows.

He had progressed more than a mile across the park when he pulled his roan up with a grunt of satisfaction. He swung out of the saddle and dropped to his knees to examine the print of shod hooves heading southwesterly.

Pat was only a fair trail-reader, but it didn't require any particular ability to read these signs right. Two horses had passed that way within a few hours. Their riders had not been pushing them, and the animals were not badly winded. That's about all Pat could make out of the tracks, but it was plenty.

HE TOOK time to roll a cigarette before remounting. The tracks were headed straight in the direction of the Windrow cabin about four miles distant. Pat was as sure he'd find Sam and Ezra as he had been sure last night that Sally would be

waiting up for him when he got back from town.

He lit his cigarette and swung back onto the roan, turned him to follow the double set of tracks leading across the park.

He didn't bother to follow the tracks, but rode erect in the saddle with his eyes fixed on the mountainside rising sharply from the edge of the park a couple of miles distant.

The lower portion of the mountain was dotted with juniper and scrub oak. Higher up, above the point where he knew the cabin to be located, were towering pines interspersed with clumps of quaking aspen.

The small cabin was old and weathered, built of stout logs, and was difficult to make out against the rocky background until one was very close. But Pat knew exactly where to look for it, and as he neared the edge of the park, his keen eyes picked it out.

He stopped his horse to study the little cabin carefully, and a slow grin stretched his mouth wide. A tiny threadlike wisp of vaporish smoke was rising from the chimney of the cabin. That was Sam and Ezra all right. They'd be careful to build the kind of fire that would send up just such a faint wisp of smoke like that. A very hot blaze of small dry sticks, fed carefully one at a time so the blaze remained uniform and very hot, never letting it die away, yet never feeding it more wood at one time than it could consume swiftly and thoroughly.

Pat had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach as he started his roan up the slope toward the cabin. One of them would certainly be on guard. He knew one of them must be watching him now, must be reporting his presence to the other. One-eyed Ezra with his scarred face and huge frame, or small, wiry, dark-featured Sam Sloan.

Pat could imagine the scene inside the cabin as he rode slowly onward up the exposed slope. The hurried confab, the consternation, and the efforts to identify the lone rider.

How near would they let him come before they betrayed their presence in the cabin? They would be certain, now, that he was no chance rider. If they'd only let him get close enough to shout to them, close enough so they'd see it was Pat Stevens—

He began to breathe a little more freely when he passed the half-way mark. Soon, he'd be close enough for them to recognize him. A little farther—

The sharp crack of a rifle shattered his hopes. A small puff of smoke rose from the north window of the cabin, and a bullet spanged off a rock ten feet in front of Pat.

He pulled his horse up abruptly. Stood in the stirrups and put his hands to his mouth to trumpet up the hillside:

"Sam! Ezra. This is Pat. Pat."

He waited anxiously but there was no response from the cabin. It was still much too far for them to hear him or recognize him. But it was plenty close for accurate rifle-shooting by either man. He'd seen them break a deer's back at a mile too often to have any doubts about that.

The first shot had been meant merely as a warning. He knew their natures, knew neither of them had any desire to kill. But he knew, also, that they would be grimly determined to keep him at his distance from the cabin. He had been with them in times of danger too much to hope that they would keep on bluffing. There might be another warning shot; or two or three more, but if he persisted in disregarding those, one of the next shots would be in earnest.

He couldn't draw his own rifle and start shooting back. In the first place, they were well protected by the thick log walls, and he had no desire to shoot it out with them even if the terms were even.

He started his horse forward cautiously.

He began to breathe again after the horse had gone twenty feet and nothing happened.

THEN another puff of smoke rose from the tiny window far up on the hill. This time the bullet sang

angrily through the air past his head and he instinctively ducked. He stopped his horse again, and the roan turned his head to peer at his rider with mildly speculative eyes. The roan seemed to be asking him, "How much longer are you going to be a damned fool? That man means business."

Pat tried shouting again, but still it had no effect. No movement showed at the cabin. After the echoes of the shot died away, there was dead silence on the hillside.

Pat slouched back in the saddle and vented his irritation by angry cursing. This was a hell of a note. There were Sam and Ezra in the cabin, and here was he less than a mile away. The situation would have been funny had it not been so deadly serious. He was safe as long as he stayed where he was. But time was passing. The Pony Express mail had to be carried into Dutch Springs before nightfall. And he had sent word that Sam would be riding with it.

If he could only manage somehow to get close enough to yell to them!

He remembered something, and relief surged over him. That would do it! Behind the cabin was a shallow arroyo that carried off the excess water from the spring. Quite narrow and not more than four feet deep, it would afford shelter for a man on foot to approach within easy hailing distance of the cabin.

He wheeled his horse down the slope, and spurred him into a gallop, making a wide circle that was well beyond a mile in radius from the cabin.

He chuckled to himself as he imagined the emotions of Sam and Ezra watching him curiously. They wouldn't know what to make of the maneuver, would be asking themselves whether they had frightened the rider off or whether this was merely some ruse.

When he reached a point almost directly west of the cabin and on only a little lower level, he pulled his horse up and trotted him into a thick growth of cedar on the bank of the arroyo.

Out of sight of the cabin, he dismounted and ground-tied the roan, then cautiously crawled over the bank and down into the gully.

It was a little deeper here than at a point directly behind the cabin, and he was able to stand erect and stay out of the small stream trickling along the bottom for quite a distance without being seen over the bank.

Then it became narrower and shallower at the same time, and to remain concealed he was forced to bend low and splash along the rocky bottom through icy water.

His riding boots weren't waterproof, and the high heels made walking difficult along the slippery, wet rocks. Twice he fell to his knees, throwing his hands forward to break his fall and splashing himself quite thoroughly. He cut his left knee on a sharp rock the second time he fell, and a sharp pain stabbed through the limb as he lurched onward, bent almost double.

He lost all track of distance and time, was afraid to lift his head and look over the bank to get his bearings for fear Sam and Ezra had guessed what he was up to and would send a bullet through his brain before he could shout to them.

He was afraid, also, to start shouting too soon. If he warned them of his coming before he was close enough for them to recognize his voice, they might take fright and slip away from the cabin.

So he went floundering on through the icy water, aware that he must look completely idiotic, but grimly determined to save his two friends from themselves if it was humanly possible to do so.

HE WAS beginning to wonder if he had somehow managed to pass beyond the cabin without knowing it when his eyes saw the welcome sight of the spring just above the arroyo. He knew the cabin must be directly below him, but he had no breath left to shout with, and he had to sink down on a rock and rest a minute before he trusted his voice to carry even that short distance.

When he was through gasping, he shouted, "Sam an' Ezra! It's Pat! I'm right here behind the cabin an' I'm comin 'out. Do you hear me? It's Pat!"

He waited, straining his ears for a reply. He couldn't hear anything except the rustle of a mountain breeze in the pines and the irritating trickle of water between his feet.

Still not daring to expose himself to a bullet, he shouted again, loudly and angrily this time.

When he got no answer to this, he began to wonder if he'd made a mistake in the location of the cabin, and he cautiously poked his head over the bank to see. The cabin was right there. Not more than twenty feet down the slope, and that same trickle of thin smoke spiraled upward from the chimney.

Infuriated at his friends for their stubbornness in not answering, Pat dragged his wet and aching body out of the arroyo and stalked down to the cabin.

He flung the door open and stepped inside, demanding angrily, "What the hell kinda game—?"

Emptiness flung his words back at him. He stared around the bare cabin in perplexity and then limped to the door and around the corner.

More than two miles away, he dimly saw the figures of two riders disappearing around the side of the mountain. He stood there and frothed at the mouth in futile anger.

While he'd been Injuning up the creek, falling on his face and cutting himself on the rocks to get close enough to talk to them, his two friends had calmly seized the opportunity to saddle their horses and ride away.

And his own horses were more than a mile distant. And him with a cut leg and aching in every joint. It was enough, by golly, to make a man swear off friendship forever.

Pat drew in a long breath and clamped his teeth over the cuss-words that kept on oozing out. He bent forward and began limping as rapidly as possible toward his horses.

CHAPTER XII

PAT STEVENS was completely winded and thoroughly angry when he reached the grove where he had left his two horses. The roan snorted and bent his ears forward inquiringly as Pat panted up.

Pat caught the dragging reins and led the roan back toward the pack-saddled bay, explaining over his shoulder, "Take it easy, hawse. You've had your ridin' for today."

He swiftly stripped the saddle from the roan. Unfastened the cumbersome pack-saddle and shifted it from the bay to the roan. He threw his saddle on the bay mare and slid the bridle off the roan's head, gave him a slap on the haunches and said, "You can take out for home any time you want."

The roan snorted and trotted away, shaking himself uneasily under the lightly burdened pack-saddle. Pat knew he would make his way back to the Lazy Mare ranch in a day or so, and for the job ahead of him he needed the bay mare. She was fresher than the roan, for one reason, having carried only the light pack-saddle this far, and she was older and more trail-wise than the roan; a sure-footed mountain horse who knew her way around in rough going.

And there was plenty of rough going ahead. Pat had figured it all out as he ran from the cabin to his horses. It was wholly useless to try to catch up with Sam and Ezra in time for Sam to make his first Pony Express ride. Their horses had had a good feed and rest at the Windrow cabin, and they had at least a four-mile head-start on him. And even if he did succeed in coming up behind them, he'd be in the same difficulty he had met while trying to make a frontal approach on the cabin. They'd never let him get close enough to recognize him. If he persisted in following them, Pat knew they'd start shooting in earnest next time.

His only chance was to head them off; and that was a wild and dangerout chance, but he was determined to take it. He knew the route the two

men would follow, knew just about the speed they would ride at.

They were circling the base of the mountain westward through a rugged terrain cut up by deep gulches and sharp hogbacks. Long ago, a trail had led directly over the top of the mountain and down the other side, cutting off at least half the distance Sam and Ezra would have to cover in their circuitous route. On this side of the mountain, the trail was steep and rocky, but passable. The other end of it blocked off by a rockslide that had left a sheer expanse of broken shale with a small mountain of piled-up and jagged rocks at the bottom waiting to receive any horse and rider foolhardy enough to attempt to negotiate the expanse of slippery shale.

Pat knew the danger of that route perfectly well. He and Sam and Ezra had discovered the rockslide the preceding fall while hunting in this region. They had discussed the danger of it at the time, had searched for an alternate route to get down off the mountain, and had finally reluctantly turned back rather than attempt the descent.

Yet, Pat knew that was his only possible chance to head off his two friends. If he could cross the mountain while they were circling the base of it, he could reach a point ahead of them on the safer trail they were following.

He adjusted the bridle to fit the bay's head, and stepped up into the saddle. She ambled forward as soon as his weight was solidly in the saddle. He turned her sharply to the left, put her down into the arroyo and across the spring-fed stream of water, then lifted her into an easy gallop, circling slightly up the mountain to hit the trail leading almost straight up.

Sam and Ezra were well out of sight now, though they might see him later from below as he neared the top. He wasn't worried about that. He knew what their reaction would be if they saw him spurring up that steep trail. They would grin and tell each other it was some fool who didn't know about the rockslide blocking the other end of the trail. They would ride on at their own good speed, serenely sure the rider would have to turn back on reaching the slide area.

Pat knew he wasn't going to turn back. He had to try it. The bay mare would make it, if any horse in Colorado could do it. If she didn't: if she lost her footing on the treacherous shale and she and her rider went hurtling down on the jagged rocks below—well, that was the kind of chance a man had to take.

He pulled her down gently to a walk when they reached the trail leading directly up. He turned her into it and gave her a loose rein, leaning far forward in the saddle to throw as much of his weight as possible on her withers.

She scrambled up nimbly at a half-trot and a half-walk, her head stretched far out at the end of her neck to give her added balance, her hind legs working like pistons and doing the lifting while her forefeet sought out the solid places in the trail just beneath her distended nostrils.

There's a trick in horseback mountain climbing. There must be complete understanding and coordination between horse and rider, absolute trust between them. The rider must be willing to give the animal a free rein and complete freedom of decision, he must be able to trust himself unreservedly to the judgment of his mount, swaying to this side or that with the movement beneath him, encouraging the animal by his own lack of fear.

Pat and the mare were like that together. They knew and trusted each other. Pat had never asked the mare to do anything she couldn't do, and thus she was eager to try anything he put her to. This upward trail was one that would have frightened many horses and men, would have taxed the agility of ninety-eight horses out of a hundred, even among those bred in that mountainous country. But the mare went up without faltering, and as they neared the top Pat began scanning the lower mountainside for sight of the two men he hoped to intercept.

He spied them after a time. Far below and just about where he had expected them to be. Two moving dots against a background of green foliage. They were traveling easily, as though in no fear of pursuit, and Pat wondered if they'd seen him yet.

IF THEY did, they reacted just as he had expected them to. Trusting the rockslide to stop him, they didn't increase their pace, were still going along at a slow trot when he topped over the mountain and they were cut off from his view.

Pat pulled the mare to a stop as soon as they were out of Sam and Ezra's sight. She was heaving from the terrific exertion of the climb, drawing in great laboring breaths of the thin mountain air, and her red coat was dark with sweat, spotted here and there with white froth blown back from her mouth.

Pat got off and stood by her, patting her neck and fondling her ears while his grim gaze followed the narrow path downward to the point where there was no more trail.

The upper edge of the slide area was almost half a mile below, a couple of miles in width and extending downward several hundred yards to the bottom. Bright sunlight was reflected upward from the smooth shale surface, and from this distance it appeared there was not a single foothold in the entire slide area for man or animal. Pat knew it was not quite as bad as that. Shale is formed in uneven layers that lie practically parallel to the slope of the hill which they form. In a slide, the layers break off unevenly, leaving small crevices and ridges which look strong enough to hold considerable weight. The great danger is always that these broken layers will again give way, starting another slide that will break away an increasing portion before it, and something that no human being can stop once it gets started.

"Take your time to get plumb rested," Pat told the bay mare grimly. "You're goin' to be needin' all your stren'th when you start down yonder."

The mare pricked her ears forward and seemed to be gravely considering the dangers of the slope below. Then she turned and rubbed her wet muzzle against Pat's arm. Her upper lip was drawn away from her teeth as though she smiled reassuringly at Pat's doubts.

He felt some of the tension go out of him, and he rubbed his hand down across her forehead, tweaked her nose playfully.

"All right, so it's funny," he agreed cheerfully. "You an' me are goin' to take a chance at killin' ourselves to do a favor to a couple of ornery coyotes that was just shootin' at me. A couple that ain't worth the powder to blow 'em to hell. You got more sense than that, I betcha. But you're not arguin' about it. If I say so, that's good enough for you."

The mare tossed her head and whinnied lightly.

Pat said, "All right, you're like another lady I know. She thinks what I do is all right, too. Makes me plumb ashamed sometimes." He put his foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle. "Down we go. An' there won't be no stoppin' when we hit that shale neither."

The mare dropped her head low, almost between her forefeet, and began to pick her way daintily.

Pat leaned far back in the saddle, bracing his weight against his feet in the stirrups. He kept the reins just tight enough to tell the mare they remained in his hands, loose enough to give her complete freedom in choosing her own path.

It was breath-taking work. Small stones were dislodged by the mare's hooves and clattered on down the steep incline to the smooth shale where they shot on down at accelerated speed. The mare's breathing was loud, but never once did she hesitate. She seemed to smell out the solid places for her forefeet and she kept her haunches well under her so that she almost crouched on the sharp declivity.

As they neared the slide area Pat began talking to her in a calm, conversational tone.

"There it is right ahead. Don't try to stop when you get to it. You got

to keep goin'. You can make it. Thing is, don't get scared. If you start slippin', just hold on tight. Don't fight it. You can't fight shale, an' you can't go any way but down. Here it is now. Right straight down."

He pressed his legs against the mare's ribs as she hesitated for an instant on the edge of the shale. She braced herself and slid her forefeet out on the smooth surface. They found a small indentation and stopped there. She gathered herself like a bucking horse with all four feet close together, then took a long step forward to another rough spot. Her nose brushed against the rock surface and it was as though she gingerly felt her way with her lips.

PAT didn't let himself look down. He was braced in the saddle, giving every bit of his concentrated attention to helping the mare by shifting his weight with her every movement. Sweat dripped from his face as they inched their way down. They were halfway down. Almost to a point of safety. If a slide started now, the distance was not so great that they would hit the jagged rocks in the bottom with deadly impetus.

Still, the mare went on. Sliding two feet here. Setting herself and rocking back on a perch so precarious that it looked as though it would not hold a coyote.

Now they were down, and there were only the broken and tumbled boulders of the rockslide to negotiate across the bottom of a choked draw.

Pat stopped sweating and began to breathe evenly again. The mare climbed surefootedly over rounded boulders, avoiding the jagged pieces with an intelligence that was more than human, and finally heaved herself up the other side of the draw.

Pat laughed and bent forward to pat her sweat-streaked neck. "You're one hawse in a million," he told her throatily. "If there's any reward money from the bank, you're gettin' it in oats."

He reined her sharply to the right and lifted her into a gallop. The trail Sam and Ezra were following was about a quarter of a mile ahead. If they had continued at the same pace they were traveling when last he saw them, they would still be a couple of miles back.

He pulled up at the edge of the old trail and leaped off. One glance told him he was in time. He led the mare back to a thick clump of juniper and left her where she couldn't be seen from the trail, then trotted back and looked about for a safe spot from which he could accost the two riders.

He selected a gnarled oak that leaned over the trail, climbed the trunk quickly and inched his way out on a thick limb to a point directly over the trail.

He straddled the limb and relaxed, smiling a little now that the strain was over. He got out the makings and rolled a cigarette while he listened alertly for his friends' approach.

He heard the ring of steel horseshoes on the rocky trail as he lit his cigarette. They were still coming at a leisurely trot, evidently feeling wholly secure in the belief that they had outdistanced him.

PAT puffed on his cigarette with satisfaction, and grinned widely when he saw their heads bobbing along above low trees in the distance. There was the huge, heavy-shouldered body of Ezra, towering a foot above his smaller companion. Ezra wore a black Stetson and dusty blue shirt, but Sam Sloan was more gaily attired in a bright red silk shirt and a fresh pair of blue jeans. They were talking and laughing together as they approached him. He could hear Ezra's booming laughter, and could see a grin wreathing the dark, ugly face of Sam Sloan.

Pat's belly muscles tightened uncomfortably as he suddenly remembered why he was here. In the excitement of heading them off, he'd forgotten that he wanted them for robbing the Dutch Springs bank and a couple of murders. It made him angry to see them joking and laughing so gaily. He had risked disgrace for their sake last night, and today he had risked his neck to get close enough to talk to them.

He was a damned fool, he told himself morosely. They hadn't thought of him last night when they'd done those things that sent them riding the owl-hoot trail. Now they were as happy as a couple of kids at an ice cream festival. As if murder was something to laugh about! And robbing their own bank. Stealing their friends' money!

He got all choked up with a curious blend of anger and of fear as he waited for them to ride beneath the tree. This was the showdown. What happened in the next few minutes would determine whether he could go on living as a respected citizen of Powder Valley or whether he took out for the Border with them. He thought of Sally and of his son, Dock—and of Kitty Lane.

Then they were directly beneath the limb, and he spoke down to them quietly without raising his voice:

"Where you two hombres headed for?"

CHAPTER XIII

SAM SLOAN and Ezra stopped their horses in the trail a few feet beyond the oak tree in which Pat was perched. Neither of them looked up. Sam frowned and said gravely to Ezra, "Damn if I didn't think I heered a voice. Sounded like 'twas comin' down from the sky."

Ezra looked relieved. He said, "By Gawd, Sam, I'm glad you heard it too. Me, I thought mebby I'd slipped a cog."

"Couldn't be no angel," Sam argued. "Sort of a he-voice, sounded like to me. You ever hear a he-angel, Ezra?"

"Shore never did." Ezra lowered his voice to a doubtful bellow. "'Ceptin' Gabriel, mebby. Do you 'low, Sam, that it could be him a-talkin' to us?"

Pat said loudly, "All right. You've had your say-so even if 'twasn't very funny."

Sam cocked his head sideways and beamed up at Pat Stevens sitting above them on the oak-tree limb. He drawled, "My lan' sakes, Ezra. Take a squint up yonder an' tell me if you see what I do. Looks like ol' Pat Stevens scrooched up there on a limb like he'd turned into a danged buzzard. An' he's talkin', by Gawd. Almost human. Buzzards cain't talk."

Ezra squinted his one eye upward with mock seriousness, then let out a whoop of laughter at sight of Pat's face. "Danged if you don't look plumb funny, Pat. Where-at did you fly from?"

Pat Stevens slid off the limb and let himself down full-length holding on with his hands for a moment, then dropping lightly to the ground.

"You boys are as funny as a pair of busted crutches," he ground out. "Slid off them cayuses an' we'll have a pow-wow."

They stepped down from their saddles, still chuckling gleefully, and Sam gave Pat a hard hand-grip while Ezra almost bowled him over with a mighty blow on the shoulder. "How'd you git here, you ol' son-of-a-sheriff?" Sam exploded. "We shore wasn't expectin' to see you no more. Thought you'd be busy chasin' around an' huntin' bank robbers an sech."

Pat said quietly, "I am."

"You am what?" Sam glanced swiftly at Ezra.

"Chasin' bank robbers. You damn fool, Ezra! What'd you do that for?"

"What'd I do what, Pat?" Ezra tried to look innocent but his scarred face was so guilty and contrite that Pat couldn't repress a grin.

He stifled his grin and said soberly, "Break in the bank. You might of known I'd have to be on your trail for that."

"How-come you think Ezra broke in that bank?"

Pat snorted his disgust. "I saw him when he got out the door. Who'd you think it was shootin' over your head an' givin' you a chance to slip away?" he asked Ezra scathingly. "Who do you think it was that sent the posse ridin' off in the wrong direction?"

"Gosh-a-mighty, Pat. Was that you inside the bank when I come out?"

Pat nodded. "I had the place surrounded air-tight. Hell, you stayed

in the vault half an hour with the light shinin' out the window."

Ezra said defensively, "It took a long time to get the money. I'm shore obliged to yuh for helpin' out."

"But why in tarnation did you ride out here to stop us?" Sam Sloan interjected. "That don't make sense. Lettin' us get away las' night an' then ridin' after us."

"I aim to take that money back to the bank."

"I reckon not, Pat." Sam's voice was gentle but decisive. "We're keepin' it."

Pat said, "I'm still sheriff of Powder Valley."

"That's too bad." Sam's voice was inflexible. "We're still keepin' the money."

"We cain't stand here talkin' too long," Ezra put in. "There's some fellers after us—one at the least. He smoked us out of the Windrow cabin awhile back, an' then tried to ride over the mountain an' cut us off. He'll be turnin' back when he sees that rockslide, an'll be on our trail again. Sam an' me wanted tuh keep ahead of him because we feel like there's awready bin too much killin'."

Pat moved back to squat down by the side of the trail with his back against the trunk of the oak. He began rolling a cigarette and said, "That was me."

A little moment of silence followed his statement. Then Sam drew in a long breath and asked disbelievingly, "You mean that was you back at the Windrow cabin—you that rode over the mountain?"

"That's right." Pat didn't look up from his cigarette.

"An' you ride down over that shale slide to get here ahead of us?"

"How else could I head you off?" Pat asked angrily. "You'd never of let me come up to you behind."

SAM let out a long sigh and said wonderingly, "I don't see why you didn't break yore fool neck."

"It's done an' I didn't," Pat reminded him. "There ain't no one else on your trail an' we got lots of time to talk. An' lots to talk about," he added grimly.

Sam and Ezra looked at each other, then squatted down and also began to roll cigarettes.

"I dunno how much you know about things," Sam began unhappily. "We had a real good reason for robbin' the bank an' takin' the owl-hoot for the border."

"I know the reason."

"Then you know we cain't go back."

"I'm not so sure of that." Pat lit his cigarette. He cleared his throat and explained. "Nobody but me has seen the knife that killed Fred Ralston."

"That the name of the dude from Denver?" Ezra put in, his single eye blazing with interest.

"That's his name."

"How-come they didn't find my knife?" Sam asked slowly.

"Because I got to him first," Pat snapped. "I hid it inside my bootleg an' didn't tell anybody. There's only Kitty's story to hook you up with that killin'," he went on soberly.

"What kinda story did Kitty tell?"

"I'd like to hear yours first. Then I'll know better what to do."

"You ain't gonna like it," Sam warned him. He shook his head with a disgusted scowl. "I reckon I've been all kinds of a fool."

Pat agreed, "I reckon you have."

"Damn a woman anyhow!" Sam exploded angrily. "Allus messin' a man up. I thought Kitty was diffrunt. I thought, by Gawd, she loved me. She said so. An' I was fool enough to believe her."

"That was before you knowed she was married," Ezra told him.

"Yeah." Sam's lips curled back from his teeth in a bitter smile. "She was married all the time—an' makin' up to me."

Pat said, "I know about that. Fred Ralston was her husband."

"Yeah. That's what I—found out las' night."

Pat moodily smoked on his cigarette and waited for Sam to go on.

"I better give you the straight of it—so you'll know you cain't help us none. I was in Kitty's room with her. I reckon I was purty drunk. An' she

was sweet-lovin'. I—ast her to marry me," Sam ended miserably.

"We was kissin'," he went on doggedly, hanging his head and avoiding Pat's eyes, "when the door busted open an' that feller walked in."

"Do you mean he busted the door open?" Pat asked with interest.

"Naw. I reckon it was unlocked. He jest walked in. An' when Kitty saw him she let out a scared scream an' said, 'My Gawd, it's Fred.' An' I ast her who the hell was Fred an' she said it was her husban' from Denver. An' he cussed me for makin' over his wife an' started to'ards me."

Sam paused to catch his breath and take a long pull on his cigarette.

"I was plumb drunk," he confessed. "I pulled my gun an' tol' him to stand back but he kep' comin'. So I shot at him twicet. But I reckon I musta bin awful drunk. I didn't even hit him. An' he kep' comin'. I pulled my knife an' went after him. Jest about the time I hit him, I passed plumb out. Whisky never did hit me like that before. Like I was hit on the head with a ax. I bin thinkin'. You reckon that bottle of whisky was doped, Pat?"

"I shore bet it was," Ezra rumbled. "I bin tellin' Sam I figger it was a put-up job. I've seen Sam dead drunk before, but he never acted like that. I'd of swore he got his on the head and knocked out, but there ain't a mark on him."

"Your head isn't sore at all?" Pat asked sharply.

"Nope. Not no more'n a hell of a headache." Sam put his hand up and felt the back of his head tenderly. "I thought 'twas gona split off, but it's easin' some now. That's why I think the whisky was doped."

PAT said, "I took two big drinks out of the same bottle. Tasted all right to me."

"Anyhow, that's what happened. All I remember is goin' after him with my knife. When I come to early this mawnin', Ezra had me tied into the saddle. He tol' me about the feller bein' dead an' about him robbin' the bank. So we figgered on cuttin' west acrost the range an' down into Mexico. You got any better idee?" he ended savagely.

Pat said, "I'd like to hear Ezra's part of it."

Ezra twisted his big face into a morose scowl. "There ain't so much for me to tell." He took a last puff on his cigarette and threw it away. "I tol' Sam he was playin' the fool with that woman. I figgered she was after his money. But he wouldn't listen to me a-tall. He swore she was on the square an' he was gonna marry her."

"Awright," said Sam angrily. "That ain't got nothin' to do with last night."

"He drunk a lot of whisky in the afternoon," Ezra told Pat. "But I didn't think he was turrible drunk. Then Kitty come in an' had a drink or two with him, an' they went out an' upstairs together. I follered after a time, and knocked on Sam's door but he didn't answer. I could hear people talkin' in Kitty's room, an' I figgered it was them. But Sam's old enough to know better, so I didn't do nothin'.

"I went in my room an' stretched out on the bed. I remember thinkin' how damn glad I was that the Pony Express started today an' Sam would have to git away from the hotel an' Kitty to ride his stretch. An' I reckon I sorta dozed off layin' there."

He paused and scowled angrily. "Fust thing I heard was the shots. Then a poundin' on my door. I got up an' Kitty was there. She was cryin' an' plenty scared. She said somethin' awful had happened an' for me to come in a hurry. So I went across in her room an' there they were. Sam an' a feller I'd never saw before. Dressed up fancy in city clothes. An' there was blood all over an' Sam's knife with blood on it. An' that pore feller starin' up at me like he blamed me for him bein' dead.

"Kitty was wringin' her hands an' cryin', an' she begged me to get Sam outta there in a hurry. She said the feller was her husband an' Sam'd knifed him when he come in an'

caught 'em. An' him not even with a gun or knife.

"I seen 'twas a bad mess, so I carried Sam into my room. He was limp as a drowned rat, but there wasn't a scratch on him an' I knowed he musta jest passed out.

"An' Kitty come in an' began talkin' fast. She recollected that Jeth Purdue was takin' over the sheriff's badge, an' she'd heard some things about Jeth that made her figger he might could be bribed to quiet the whole thing down. She pointed out how it'd go hard with Sam if it got out that he'd killed a man who'd caught him kissin' his wife, but she promised to help hush it all up, sayin' she hated her husband anyhow an' was glad he was dead, an' now she could marry Sam mebby if we'd use some of our money to pay off Jeth Purdue.

"Well, it sounded all right to me." Ezra paused to draw a long breath, and he squirmed under Pat's direct gaze. "What would you of done?" he asked defensively. "You know a jury wouldn't take kindly to that kinda killin'. I didn't blame Sam none, but other people wouldn't look at it that way."

Pat said, "I reckon not." Then he added, "Did Kitty give any particular reason why she thought Jeth could be bribed?"

"She acted purty shore he'd do it." Ezra wrinkled his brow. "Best I recollect, she said somethin' about knowin' him before she an' him come to Powder Valley. I didn't ast her much about it. I jest tol' her to see could she fix it, an' told her Sam an' me'd foot the bill with our money we got from sellin' the ranch."

"All right. That much of it is perfectly clear," Pat told him. "What happened to make you take out down a rope through the window an' then do such a crazy thing as robbin' the bank?"

"That was all yore fault," Ezra told him sorrowfully. "If you'd turned the sheriffin' over to Jeth like you was s'posed to, everything woulda bin awright"

"How did you know I hadn't?"

"I heerd you arguin' with Joe Deems to the foot of the stairs—about comin' up. An' I heard you tell Joe you was still sheriff. So I ducked in my room an' locked the door. An' when you come knockin', I kept quiet an' didn't answer."

"WHY not?" Pat asked impatiently. "You knew I'd help you—an' you wouldn't have to pay me like you would Jeth."

"You know damn well I couldn't ast you to do that, Pat." Ezra shook his big red head earnestly. "You take yore sheriffin' too serious. That woulda put you plumb in the middle of bad trouble. Sure, yo're Sam's best friend. That's why I couldn't drag you into it. If you did help us cover it up, you'd hate yourself for doin' it. You kin see that, Pat."

"I can see how you figgered, but it was the wrong way to do it," Pat told him. "Go ahead with the rest of it."

"With you still sheriff, I figgered it was best to get Sam outta town in a hurry. So I throwed a slip knot round him and lowered him out the winder of my room, then tied the other end to the bed and clumb down. I saddled our hawses fast an' led 'em aroun' to the jail and writ you that note. I left Sam there, still passed out, an' went around to the bank an' broke in the back door. I didn't know anybody saw me."

"Why did you have to add bank robbin' on top of everything else?" Pat demanded wearily.

"We had to have money." Ezra looked at him in surprise. "All our cash money 'ceptin' a few dollars was in the bank. We couldn't take out on the owl-hoot trail broke. Hell, Pat, that wouldn't of bin a mite sensible. An' we couldn't wait till the bank opened this mawnin'. I didn't see no other way but to take it out my ownself."

"All right. I don't blame you for getting your own money. But I'm takin' all the rest of it back. Every cent."

"All the rest of what?"

"All the money you stole that didn't belong to you," Pat told him firmly.

"Gosh-a-mighty! That's what I'm tellin' you. I broke in the bank to get our money. I didn't take no other. That's what took me so long in the vault. Countin' out jest how much we had comin'."

Sam began to chuckle at the expression on Pat's face. "You oughtta knowed that's all Ezra would take. Jest what was comin' to us. Did you think he stole all the money in the bank, Pat?"

Pat said, "All right. Maybe I should of guessed it was that way. I'm glad to know it But there's one more thing I still want to know. What about Jeth Purdue?"

"What about him?" Ezra asked innocently.

"That's what I'm askin' you. Did you see him after you left the hotel?"

Ezra shook his head with a puzzled look. "Nope. I shore didn't."

"What about you?" Pat asked Sam.

"Hell, I don't know nothin' that happened. I was passed out cold."

Pat began to roll another cigarette. Without looking up, he said, "Jeth is dead. Gunned from outside the jail window with a forty-five while I had him locked inside."

CHAPTER IV

A LONG moment of stunned silence followed Pat's announcement of Jeth Purdue's death. Then Sam said wonderingly, "You had Jeth locked up?"

"That's right."

"What for? He was s'posed tuh be sheriff today."

"I had a reason to."

"An' he's dead too?" Ezra broke in.

"Murdered," Pat said shortly. "Shot in the face without a chance of shootin' back."

"By golly, there shore was plenty of excitement in Dutch Springs las' night," exclaimed Ezra.

"What you askin' us about 'im for?" Sam asked suspiciously.

Pat Stevens shrugged. "You were at the bottom of the other devilment."

"An' you thought we killed Jeth?"

"It made sense," Pat argued. "Kitty told me about tellin' you she'd try to fix it with Jeth. When you decided to take out, I thought maybe you were afraid she'd already told him—an' decided to gun him too."

"I never done it, Pat," Ezra assured him earnestly. "I swear I didn't know he was in that jail when I left Sam there an' went to the bank." He paused suddenly, staring at Sam with his one eye.

Pat, too, was watching the small, dark man grimly. Sam blinked at their concentrated attention and asked uneasily, "What you-all lookin' at me like that for?"

Pat drew in a long breath. "You sure you stayed passed out all the time till you woke up this mawnin' tied on your hawse?"

"Course I'm shore. I don't remember nothin'."

Pat turned to Ezra. "Was he movin' around any? Tryin' to talk or anything like that?"

Ezra shook his big head. "Nary a bit." His voice was hoarse. "I don't reckon he moved while I was at the bank."

"But you didn't have him tied up then?" Pat asked sharply.

"No. I left him layin' by his hawse. When I left the bank in a hurry I grabbed him up an' carried him on my hawse for half a mile outta town. Then I heard the posse take the wrong fork, an I stopped to put him in his saddle."

Pat asked Sam, "How many times you say you shot at Ralston before goin' after your knife?"

"Twict. The way I recollect it."

"Have you shot your gun since then?"

"Nope." The bewilderment on Sam's dark features was beginning to give way to anger. "Look here. What're you fellers thinkin'?"

Pat held out his hand and said steadily, "Lemme see your gun."

Sam glared at him, then reluctantly dropped his hand to the butt of his holstered .45. He drew it out and flipped it in the air, catching it by the muzzle to present it to Pat

butt-first. He growled, "Awright, Sheriff. Here you are."

Pat broke it and dropped the unfired cartridges into the palm of his hand. The brass cylinders that had been fired remained in the gun, having been swelled by the explosion so they would not drop out without being forced.

Pat shook his head and extended his open palm for Sam and Ezra to see. "There's only three cartridges that ain't been fired."

SAM'S eyes became frightened. He wet his lips and said hastily, "That makes it come out right. I generally don't carry but five—leavin' the cylinder under the hammer empty so she won't shoot if I drop her. There's three in your hand—an' the two I shot at Ralston makes five."

Pat said, "Maybe." He pushed the plunger that forced the empty brass cartridges out. He shook his head. "This time you had her loaded all the way around, Sam. Here's *three* empties."

"Tell you what," said Ezra hastily. "I reckon Sam was too drunk to count good last night. I bin thinkin' I heard three shots in Kitty's room 'stead of jest two."

Pat looked at him sharply. "Don't lie to me, Ezra." He sounded tired and sad.

Ezra shook his head vigorously. "I ain't lyin'. I swear I ain't. I'll take my oath on it that I heard three shots."

"What's the matter with you fellers?" Sam asked wildly. "What's it matter where that other bullet went?"

Pat said, "I reckon Ezra's thinkin' like I am: that maybe you sort of come to enough while he was at the bank to get up an' walk around—to maybe walk to the window of the jail-house."

Sam shook his head and declared positively, "I don't remember nothin'."

"Maybe you don't remember. I ain't saying you're lyin', Sam. I'm wonderin' if you could of done it without rememberin'."

"Gunned Jeth Purdue? Without rememberin'?" Sam's voice came out in a hoarse whisper.

"I hope not," Pat said hastily. "I hope not, Sam." He flipped the six-gun shut and handed it back to Sam, empty. "I reckon I better keep these here bullets for evidence."

"What kinda evidence?" Ezra asked angrily. "I've done tol' you I swear I heard three shots in the hotel."

"All right," said Pat amiably. "Then these'll be evidence that you're tellin' the truth." He got up and stretched. "We better be ridin', I reckon."

They both looked at him in astonishment. "You goin' with us?"

"Why, I reckoned you'd be goin' back with me," he told them pleasantly.

"Now looky here, Pat," Ezra began earnestly. "You know doggone well—"

"I know doggone well that you two yahoos ain't got no business runnin' off like this. How about that Pony Express set-up?"

An expression of pain flickered across Sam's ugly face. "That hurts worse'n anything," he admitted. "I was shore lookin' forward to the job of ridin' the mail."

"You too," Pat reminded Ezra sharply. "You signed up for the job of runnin' that station. They're dependin' on both of you to carry that first batch of mail through today. Think how it'll look if Dutch Springs falls down on the job. They say there's goin' to be governors an' everything in Denver when the first rider gets there. An' the president of the United States his own self has got a letter ridin' in that mail pouch."

"Shore hate tuh let the president down," Ezra agreed mournfully. "But there jest ain't no way of gettin' 'round it, Pat. Sam'll have tuh stand trial for the murder if he shows his face back in Dutch Springs."

"I ain't so sure about that." Pat shook his head slowly.

"What do you mean?"

Pat shrugged his shoulders. "I told you-all that I got in Miss Kitty's

room first an' carried Sam's knife out."

Sam's jaw dropped. "You don't mean—you'd cover up for me, Pat?"

"We've been friends a long time." Pat reminded him gruffly.

"Shore, but I still don't like for you to do that. Hell, Pat. You jest cain't. I ain't gonna let you. Not with the way you feel about lawin' an' all. You've still got that sheriff's oath you took in Winters' store."

"I'll be the judge of what I want to do."

"Nope." Sam Sloan shook his head positively. "'Twouldn't be right nohow."

"Be just as bad," Pat argued, "if I let you go on from here."

Both friends stared at him in consternation.

"What's the difference whether I turn you loose here or let you go back to town an' cover up for you? Either way, I'm turnin' against my oath of office. If I don't arrest you now, I'll be aidin' an' abettin' your escape." He spread out both his hands helplessly.

"That's easy enough," Ezra snorted. He drew his gun and covered the Powder Valley sheriff. "We'll take yore gun off you an' then you cain't he'p yoreself."

"What good'll that do?" snorted Pat wrathfully. "I still know I could have taken you if I'd tried. I tell you it's this way. You go back with me an' let me see can I fix things up—or I ride to the Border with you."

"You? Take the owl-hoot trail with us?" gasped Sam.

"I don't see nothin' else for it if you're goin' to be stubborn an' ride that way yourselves."

"You can't do it, Pat. You belong in Powder Valley. There's Sally. An' there's Dock."

"Yeah, it'd be kinda hard on them," Pat muttered.

"It'd dang near kill Sally," Sam told him angrily. "An' you want yore boy to grow up knowin' his pappy was a crooked sheriff that rode off with a couple of outlaws 'stead of arrestin' them?"

Pat shrugged helplessly. "What else can I do? Only way out of it is for you to come back with me. I got an idea," he added slowly, "that I can work things out so there won't be no trouble over them killings. An' the bank robbin'—well, if you just took your own money I reckon you can't be held for taking something that already belonged to you."

"We'd ruther go on," Ezra told him wistfully.

"I'm ridin' with you if you do."

"You danged stubborn fool," Sam swore softly, and his voice was choked with emotion. He abruptly turned his back on Pat and walked away.

"Don't do it Pat," Ezra implored him. "Shucks, me an' Sam don't matter. We're kinda tired of Powder Valley anyhow. Need a change of scenery. An' we both got a yen to see what's down on the other side of the Border."

"You lie," said Pat quietly. "You've both been proud as peacocks to get that Pony Express job. It's something big an' important for the West an' they need you two to help run it right."

Sam turned and came back. "No use arguin' with him," he told Ezra savagely. "You know that as good as me. Stubbornest damn fool west of the Mississippi when he sets his mind on somethin'. An' he's right, too," Sam went on swiftly. "No use of you ridin' off into trouble with me. I got into it. I wouldn't of let you if I'd bin in my right mind last night. An' this mawnin' when I come to, it was too late. You'd already busted into the bank an' carried me off.

"We'll ride back with you, Pat," Sam's dark features tightened recklessly. "I'll make that first ride into Dutch Springs with the mail. After that—well, we'll see."

EXACTLY as though he could read Sam's mind, Pat knew what the wiry little man was planning. He'd make that first mail ride, and then he'd confess to killing Fred Ralston to prevent Pat from breaking his oath by covering up for him.

There was no use discussing that now. Pat knew Sam would deny it violently if he accused him of having that in mind. And Pat still had hopes that he could fix things up to keep Sam out of jail. He didn't rightly know just exactly how everything would work out, but he had the glimmering of a plan. A lot depended on getting Sam back to the Pony Express station in time to carry that first mail sack—as Lon Estis was announcing in town that Sam would do.

So he said gruffly, "That's fair enough. We've got just about time to make it back to the station in time for both of you to take over like nothing had happened. Like you say, Sam, we'll see how things turn out after you've made that first ride."

He went back to the clump of juniper where he'd left the bay mare, mounted her and rode back to rejoin his two friends in the trail.

Sam looked at him curiously as he rode up, and asked, "Weren't you ridin' a roan when you tried to come up to Windrow's cabin?"

"Yeah. Big Red. I threw the pack-saddle on him an' turned him loose to go home when I saw my only chance to head you off was by ridin' over the mountain an' down the slide."

"You must of bin figgerin' on a long ride. Bringin' a lead hawse an' a pack-saddle."

"I figgered on trailin' you down into New Mexico if you'd gone across the pass."

"How'd you know we didn't?"

"I stopped by the Estis ranch. Lon told me you hadn't rode that way."

"He knew you were after us?"

"No. No one knows it. Like I say—no one knows you killed Ralston or held up the bank. I reckon Kitty Lane an' Joe Deems'll keep their mouths shut till I have a talk with 'em."

Sam Sloan nodded as though that satisfied him, and the three strung out single file on the trail and put their horses to a gallop. The sun was almost directly overhead, showing that there was little time to spare for Sam and Ezra to reach the Pony Express way-station in time to speed the first pair of mailbags on the new north-south route into Dutch Springs.

CHAPTER XV

IT WAS less than an hour from the time for the first Express rider to come galloping in from the South when Pat left Sam and Ezra at the little way-station ten miles south of Dutch Springs.

The station itself consisted of a two-room shack, with beds in the rear room for the station-keeper and the rider who was lying over between trips. Behind the shack was a large corral and a feed-shed for the carefully selected mounts of the fast mail service. The way the route would be ridden, as Pat understood it, was that Sam would be ready and waiting with a fresh horse saddled when the rider from the south completed his ten-mile dash at breakneck speed.

As he reached the station, he'd have his mailbags loose and ready to fling to Ezra. Without wasting a moment, Ezra would toss them behind Sam's saddle and he would gallop away on the next lap to Dutch Springs. The rider whom he had relieved would sleep at Ezra's station until Sam returned from Dutch Springs the next day with the south-bound mail. It was an intricate and speedy process, carefully worked out by the Government and requiring the services of a great many men and horses, but it had already been proven feasible on the east-west route, and there was no reason why this new north-south feeder route should not prove just as valuable.

The riders were carefully selected for horsemanship and reckless courage, with none of them weighing over one hundred and thirty-five pounds; while the station masters were required to be men of proven integrity, chosen for their ability to handle horses and men.

There was a curious air of tension about the little way-station as Pat prepared to ride away. Both Sam and Ezra were having a hard time trying to act nonchalant as they waited for

the first rider to gallop in from the south. They were both strongly conscious of the responsibility that rested upon them; had an excited feeling of being a part of something big and important in the growing-up of the West.

Today would mark an important milestone in the history of Powder Valley—and they were to have a part in making that history.

Pat grinned down at them from the back of his bay mare as he paused to roll a final cigarette before riding away. "I'm sorry I won't be here to see you take off, Sam. You figure on hangin' up a record on the ride into Dutch Springs?"

"I won't be ridin' at a walk," Sam told him.

"I bin thinkin' about things," Ezra broke in anxiously. "I shore hate tuh not be in Dutch Springs an' see how things turn out. Don't you reckon it'd be awright for me to mosey on in after Sam's took out with the mail? There won't be a blasted thing for me tuh do here till Sam gets back tomorrow."

Pat licked his cigarette and shook his head. "You got to be on the job here, Ezra. You promised that when you took the job."

"Don't see why," Ezra said wistfully.

"Because this is Government business. If anything goes wrong at one station along the way, it throws the whole schedule off kilter. That's one reason why I wanted you boys to come back. Think what would of happened if you two hadn't been here when that rider comes in an hour from now. The whole damn mail route would be ruined. Folks wouldn't trust their letters to go through, an' wouldn't pay the big money for speed. Damn it, you got to realize the Government's dependin' on both of you."

"Yeh, I reckon yo're right," Ezra agreed pensively. "By gorry, think of it, Sam. The President of the United States will be waitin' in Washington to hear what time you make on yore run."

Sam said, "Yep. I've bin thinkin' of that," in a surly tone. He looked up at Pat from beneath the brim of his Stetson. "You gonna be in Dutch Springs when I ride in?"

"I reckon. 'Less you pass me on the way. An' you're liable to do that if I don't get started. I ain't goin' to ride this she-hawse any too hard. Not after the way she brought me down over that rockslide."

"Yeh. You better be startin'," Sam agreed. "I'm gonna be ridin' like a streak of greased lightnin' when I get them mail bags on my saddle. Give me room if you see me comin'."

Pat Stevens nodded. "I'll be seein' you in Dutch Springs. An' you take it easy, Ezra. I got a hunch everything will be all right."

AS HE rode away he wished it was more than a hunch. He thought he saw a way out for them, but shucks, it was just a lot of guessing. He needed something definite to back up his guess-work. If he could get that—if a certain thing would happen during Sam's ride into Dutch Springs—

But he refused to let himself do too much hoping. It was a wild chance at best. He'd have to try bluffing it out if his hunch didn't come true, and bluffing was a tricky solution.

He spurred the willing mare into a lope as he left the way-station behind. The road to Dutch Springs lay flat across the open prairie for a distance of some five miles. He wanted to be across that open expanse well ahead of Sam.

There was a rough area of foothills and deep gulches through which the road passed after the open plain ended. This rough area was not more than about half a mile in width, and after the road passed it there were ranch houses along the way leading into the outskirts of the village.

If he made the ride on schedule, it would just about be dusk when Sam hit that broken stretch of country. That was the time and the place if Pat's figuring was right.

He held the mare to a lope all along the stretch of open country. The lower rim of the sun was almost touching the topmost western peaks

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THESE GUNS SPEAK FOR ME

By Lee Floren

(Author of "Powdersmoke Prescription," "The Boothill Buckaroo," etc.)

People fear you because you're a killer, Porter. But yet, they send for you to clean out their towns. And this town — your old home town, is no different!"

TALL Jim Porter stood in front of the Stockman's bank and checked his guns. The afternoon sun, slanting in, sent facets of light dancing from the .45s. And the face of Jim Porter was stern and foreboding.

Jim Porter juggled the guns momentarily, finding satisfaction in their weights. He broke open the loading gates. Each held six shells. He holstered the weapons.

He did not jam the Colts deep into holsters, but let them ride easily in the leather pouches. Then he saw Martin come out of the Silver Bird saloon, across the street.

Martin was short, squat. He walked with a rolling gait, and his stubby-fingered hands rested on his two Colts. His eyes did not leave Jim Porter, and his heavy voice, rolling across the street, beat in Jim Porter's ears.

"Jim Porter," he called.

"Yes."

Martin advanced. The street-dust purred against the man's boots. Jim Porter knew that Martin was thinking of the past—and finding in it a source of driving anger.

He murmured, "That's far enough, Martin."

Martin halted then. He stood with his heavy legs wide apart, boots anchored in the dust. Twenty feet separated them.

Martin said, "You wounded me that night in Deadwood, but I drug myself out of town. You figured I'd die, Jim Porter. But I lived! Lived, hear that? I came back into Deadwood to kill you. But you—and those damned guns of yours—had drifted on. I lost track of you, Porter. Then I heard they'd called you into this town. I left word with the liverybarn man to tell you I was lookin' for you."

"He tol' me," said Jim Porter quietly. He added, "Do you work for Ben Matson, fella?"

"I do."

Now two men stood in front of the Silver Bird. Jim Porter lifted his calm gaze to them. One was tall, lanky. He wore his gun tied low on his right thigh. Jim Porter did not know this man.

The other was big: Wide of shoulder, heavy, solid. He studied Jim Porter across the dust and the heat. And Jim Porter knew, somehow, that he was looking at Ben Matson.

Then he jerked his attention back to Martin. For Martin's voice, jerky and uneven, rasped against his ears.

"Pull your guns, Jim Porter!"

THIS man Martin was fast. Cat-fast. Even now, his guns were leaving leathers, their black bores raising. Hot blood tumbled through Martin's veins. He was ahead of Jim Porter—way ahead. Hope ran like a strong wine through Martin's brain. Then, suddenly, that hope died.

Strangely, Martin couldn't breath. A steely hoop, strangling and deadly, seemed twisted around his chest. The sight of Jim Porter, dim and vague, standing there with smoking guns, seemed unreal, ghostly.

Martin did not remember firing his own Colts. He did not know that his leads had pounded harmlessly into the dust at Jim Porter's boots.

Something hot, something sticky, trickled down Martin's chest. Martin sat down, tried to raise his guns, failed.

"You've killed me, Porter!"

Jim Porter said, "I guess so, Martin."

Martin spoke slowly. "So this is the way a man feels when he dies. Numb an' silent an' full of pain." Despair swept across his bleak face. Darkness closed in; he did not fight it. He bent forward, rolled sidewise, and never moved again.

Somebody said, "He's dead."

The voice came from the sidewalk. Jim Porter lifted his gaze to the six townsmen standing there. He knew four of them. And there was, he saw, a resentment, an antipathy, in their gazes. This rubbed savagely against the grain of Jim Porter.

Every town is the same, an inner voice said. *The people fear you because you are a killer. But yet, they send for you to clean out their towns. They hire a wolf to kill a wolf. But all the time they're afraid of you. And this town—your old home town—is no different from the others.*

He looked at the girl.

SHE stood across the street in front of the drugstore. She wore

a gingham housedress and the endless prairie wind pressed the dress softly against the outlines of her firm breasts, the clean length of her thighs. Jim Porter saw horror mirrored in her brown eyes. This stung him with a knife-like bitterness. Then she entered the drugstore.

Now Ben Matson and his gunman moved into the street. Jim Porter went forward and met them beside Martin's corpse.

"Are you Ben Matson?" he asked.

"I am."

"I'm Jim Porter. This town sent for me. They want me to clean out you an' your killers, Matson."

"Where's your star?"

Jim Porter smiled. "Haven't had time to get it yet. I just got into town about ten minutes ago. This town—an' these people—don't want you aroun' any longer, Matson."

"I see."

"You'll have to leave," said Jim Porter. He added, "Or I'll have to kill you."

"I don't kill easy," said Ben Matson. "Always remember that, Porter."

Matson's companion said, "I'm Jud Corey. Martin was my friend. I'm takin' up his fight, Porter."

Jim Porter studied him. "I've heard of you, Corey."

Corey's voice was low. It carried great depth. "Why not pull your guns, Porter?" he demanded.

"I always give a man a chance to leave town, Corey. If he doesn't take that chance, then it's guns. I'm givin' you that opportunity."

Corey opened his mouth to laugh. Then, as Jim Porter hit him, the gunman's teeth clicked together savagely. The crushing blow smashed against Corey's blunt jaw. Corey flung up his right arm, and Jim Porter hit him again.

The blow drove Corey back against Ben Matson. Matson stepped aside. Corey would have fallen had not Jim Porter grabbed him by the shirt front. Three times Jim Porter hit Corey in the face, all the time holding the gunman upright. Then he released his grip and Corey fell.

Corey rolled in the dust, reaching for his gun. But already Jim Porter had Corey's .45. Corey got slowly to his feet. Jim Porter took the bullets from Corey's gun, handed it to him.

"You two better leave town," he said.

No more was said. There was no fight here, for the present, and Jim Porter knew it. Later, there would be gunsmoke. So Jim Porter turned.

THE group of townsmen still stood on the sidewalk. He saw Banker Hanson there, so Porter went that way. He glanced back once. Matson and Corey were toting the dead Martin into the Silver Bird.

He said, "Hello, Hanson."

"Hello, Jim."

The others nodded briefly. They talked for a minute or two about irrevelant matters. There was, Jim noticed, a tenseness. Finally Hanson said, "Let's go down to the bank, Jim."

"What does the town think?" asked Jim.

They entered the bank. They went into Hanson's office. The banker opened a drawer in his desk, took out the badge. He tossed it to Jim Porter.

"You haven't answered my question," reminded Jim.

"Do you need an answer?"

"I've got eyes," said Jim slowly. "They don't like me. But I would like your opinion, Hanson."

"Your appointment barely carried the town council's vote. A few members were violently opposed. I talked them into hiring you. You have two powerful enemies in Jud Corey and Ben Matson. You face a strong enemy in the townspeople. But your biggest enemy is yourself, Jim."

"What do you mean?"

"I've known you all your life, Jim. I held you when you were a baby. I bought you candy when you were a kid. I saw you go to school. I'm your friend, Jim. And because we are friends, let me give you some advice."

"Go ahead."

"We have both made a mistake. I made mine when I had the council

appoint you marshal. You made yours when you made your living by your gunspeed. I can correct mine. You can never correct yours."

"Yes."

"Did you see Connie today, Jim, when you killed Martin? She stood in front of her store. And her eyes, Jim, were the eyes of a woman who had seen red hell unfold before her. Don't let your guns turn her against you. She loves you."

"Then why did she want me to come home? You said, in your letter, that she wanted me appointed marshal."

"The ways of a woman are hard to understand, Jim. Man cannot understand them because he is a man. But Connie had some definite reason for asking you to return. I don't know what it is. Neither do you. But Connie does. You've been gone five years, Jim. During those years, you've lived by your guns. You had to leave this town because you had killed men. These people will always remember that. Today, they saw you shoot down Martin. And the brutality, the horror, of it sickened them. Now do you see?"

Jim Porter nodded.

JIM PORTER walked down the Main street. His spur rowels, dragging on the plank sidewalk, made a musical sound. But there was no music in Jim Porter's heart. His thoughts were dark. turgi.

Eyes were watching him. Watching from stores, from saloons, from business houses. He met old man Ballard.

"Hello, Ballard."

No answer.

Jim said, louder: Hello."

"I'm not deaf," said the old man, shortly. "Hello."

The old man continued on his way. Jim Porter moved on, a hard hand gripping his heart. The oldster's slight, he knew now, had been intentional, and not because of hard hearing. And, strangely, that thought hurt.

Mrs Norwich came out of the Mercantile carrying a shopping basket, and came toward him. Then she saw him and crossed the street to avoid meeting him. Doc Snell, fat as ever, sat on the bench in front of his office. Jim said hello.

"How's things, Doc?"

"Some of us, Jim, are glad to see you."

"You one of them?"

"I am. But you don't intend to stay, do you, Jim?"

"I think so."

"Don't stay, fella."

Jim entered the drugstore. A few kids were reading the magazines racked in front of the cigar counter. Connie was mixing a prescription. Jim's heart beat a little faster at the sight of her cool beauty.

"Let's go back into the office, Jim. We can talk better there." Jim entered ahead of her and she closed the door behind them. She leaned against it: a pretty girl with tired eyes. And Jim felt something akin to pity move through him.

"Glad to see me, Connie?"

"Yes. And no."

He kissed her. Her lips were cold. "There's nobody else?" he asked.

"Only you, Jim."

Irritation touched him. "You don't seem very glad to see me."

"But I am, Jim." She closed her eyes, leaned her head back. This time, her lips clung to his. The feel of her proud body, the smell of her, touched him strongly. He stepped back.

"All right," he said, almost gruffly. "Talk."

"Jim," she said, "you're no fool. You have eyes; you have ears. I made a mistake, Jim. I asked Hanson to bring you home. And now, I don't know."

He stood there, face bleak. *Here it is again,* he thought. *Now she is saying the same thing. For five years, I have lived by my guns. Now, those five years are catching up with me. My guns—and my way of life—are turning even her against me.*

Now another voice whispered, *You can whip this town, Jim Porter. You have whipped everything you have met. Whipped it with your guns, your fists, your brain. There is nothing you cannot defeat. Never run,*

Jim Porter. You have your pride. You can whip your past.

STONY-FACED, his battle raged. And Connie, sensing his inner struggle, spoke again.

"We can leave this town," she said. "We can leave this country. We can go to South America. We can go to Australia. I can sell my store. Banker Hanson will buy it. Jim, would you do that?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I am a man," he said. "I have pride. That would be running."

"Pride," she said bitterly. "What is pride? I'll tell you what it is, Jim Porter. You Porters all have pride. Pride led your father to a gunsmoke grave. Pride caused your brother Bill to die under a gun. Pride made you take up their fight —made you go to the ways of a gun. Now your pride is doomed to keep us apart. Your pride will kill you, Jim."

"Brave men die proudly, Connie."

"Then you'll go against Corey and Matson?"

"Yes."

"Your pride demands it?"

"Yes, Connie."

She said softly, "Then God help us, Jim Porter. God in his Heaven look down upon us and help us."

"My guns," he said, "are my god."

"Your guns are not your god," she said. "They are the power that is to destroy you, Jim Porter."

Jim left.

He went to the liverybarn. His buckskin, tired from its long trek, nickered as he entered, then started eating again. He hired a blue roan gelding from the proprietor.

"Leavin' town, Porter?"

"Sure am."

"Comin' back?"

"You ask too many questions."

He rode toward the south. Here greasewood and sagebrush grew high and there were foxtail and bluejoint grass. A covey of young sagehens flew out of the brush with whirring wings.

This was his home range. That thought brought satisfaction. He gained the foothills an hour later. He put the roan down a coulee and rode along its bottom for a mile. Now he came out among the scrubpine along the summit of a ridge.

Hidden here, he drew rein. A rider was following him and that rider, he saw, was Corey. He rode on again.

Five miles farther he stopped and, hidden, he looked for Corey. But he could see the man nowhere. Corey had hidden in the gully down in the pines. Corey was waiting until he rode back to town.

Twenty minutes later he came to a group of buildings situated on Cottonwood creek. A log ranch-house was set against the hill. The corrals and the bunk-house were in good repair. He dismounted and knocked at the ranch-house door. A fat Mexican woman opened it.

"Hello, Conchita."

"*Senor* Jeem! Come in."

It was cool in the big room. An old woman, stoopshouldered and gray, sat in a rocking chair facing him. She did not rise.

"Hello, Mother."

"Jim?" She made it a question.

He saw her eyes, then. They were blank, expressionless. She was totally blind. He knelt beside her chair.

"You're blind," he said.

"YES," she said, "I have been blind for four years. And sometimes, Jim, I'm glad for that. I cannot see your face then." She ran her fingers over his features. "My fingers tell me all, Jim. Yours is a proud face. But it is the face of a killer. Sometimes I wish I were deaf, too. Then I could never hear the stories about you."

He felt sick at heart, and tired. *She is like the others,* he thought. *She never thinks of the happiness my guns have brought. I have gone into roaring towns where a good woman dare not walk the streets. My guns have tamed those towns. Now those women walk unmolested. They never mention that. They talk only of the men I have killed.*

"I'm home to stay, mother."

She shook her head. "No, Jim, you can't stay here. There would

only be trouble. Gunmen would ride in to try to kill you. You have too many enemies. I'm an old woman, Jim, and I want to spend the rest of my life in peace."

"Mother—"

"Jim, leave the United States. Take Connie and go to South America. You can start all over again there. You can't stay here, Jim. You can't escape your past."

He said soberly, "I understand."

"Go to Connie. Take her, and leave. Don't go against the guns of Corey and Matson and Martin."

"Martin's dead," he said. "I killed him." He added, "I had to, or he'd have killed me. I carry a star. I can't forget that, Mother. I owe that to the people who hired me."

"They distrust you, they hate you. You have your father's pride. You even talk as he did."

"I'm his son."

She said, "Goodby, Jim."

She wanted him to go. He looked at her for the last time. Conchita had tears in her eyes when she opened the door for him.

HE KNEW this country well so he circled unseen through the hills, and came in behind the spot where Corey waited. The dusk was thick now, and he had to work fast, or soon it would be too dark.

He tied the roan in the brush and went ahead, carrying his Winchester. He gained a high ridge and here he hunkered, searching the terrain with his field glasses. Finally the lenses found Corey.

The gunman lay on his belly among the rocks. From there he could watch the trail below. He had his rifle over the rock in front of him.

Jim Porter moved forward toward Corey. He worked his way with a great patience, for this was old to him. He had little heart for the job ahead. Even now it was bitter to his palate, sick to his heart. For the theme was the same: Kill or be killed.

Now he was fifty feet behind Corey. He settled there, and watched the man. Corey was rolling a cigaret. Jim Porter let him lick the cigaret, let him light it. Then he spoke.

"Corey."

Corey rolled over suddenly and stared at him. But the thick brush and the dusk made for uncertain vision, so Jim Porter moved out and then Corey saw him plainly. And Corey's face was strong with conflicting emotions.

"Are you waitin' for me, Corey?"

"What'd you mean, Porter?"

"I saw you trail me out of town. I saw you hide in this canyon. I knew then you intended to bushwhack me. But I outguessed you, Corey."

"I reckon so," said Corey.

Corey had dropped his cigaret. He ran his thumb across it, extinguishing the coals. He sat up. His rifle lay beside him. He studied Jim Porter.

Corey's brain was busy. Jim Porter's rifle, he saw, lay idly across his knees. He knew Jim Porter intended to kill him. But Jim Porter was going to give him an even chance.

Corey grabbed his rifle.

Corey did not bring the rifle to his shoulder. He flicked back the hammer and shot as he raised the weapon. But he shot too quickly. His bullet missed Jim Porter. And, by that token, Corey knew he was dead.

Jim Porter's Winchester spoke. The bullet hit Corey in the heart. The gunman fell back. He dropped his rifle. Slowly the echoes of the gunfire died. But Jud Corey did not hear them.

Jim Porter levered the spent cartridge from barrel, kicked in a new one. He did not go to Corey. He went down into the canyon and found Corey's horse. He untied the animal and led it back and boosted Corey's limp body across the saddle.

He tied Corey's hands and feet to the cinch-rings. Mounted now, he led Corey's horse. He rode toward town.

THE darkness was thick when he reached the cowtown. He rode into the livery through the back door. The hostler was evidently out to supper. He got the lighted lan-

tern and unsaddled his roan by its feeble yellow rays. Connie entered the barn.

"What are you doin' here, Connie?"

She wore a hoop-dress of silk and the tips of her shoes showed from under it. A small hat, decorated by a long plume, sat on her brown hair.

"I'm leaving, Jim."

"Leavin'? Why?"

"I've sold my store, Jim. I can't stand this any longer. They're waiting for you, Jim. They know that Corey followed you out of town. They're like wolves, vultures. Even now Ben Matson is waiting in his saloon. Waiting to see whether you or Corey would ride back."

"But why are you goin'?"

"Jim, I was instrumental in bringing you back home. I had a definite purpose behind my request to the town council. Don't tell me you are blind! Don't tell me you cannot see!"

He understood then. The sickening realization flooded him with bitterness. He had thought he could return home and stay. She, in her womanly wisdom, had known this was impossible. So she had called him home.

"So that's why?"

"You would have gone on and on and on, Jim. You and your guns and the death they personify. Then, one day, you would have been killed. I had to show you what these people—your neighbors and 1 friends—think of you. They think the same of you as the others you have met. Your name is feared, and hated, all over the west. Now do you understand?"

"I do."

"The stage is coming into town, Jim. Hear it? My luggage is at the depot. I'm taking that stage. I cannot stay here any longer. This town holds only memories. And those memories hurt."

"You're runnin' away," he said.

"Yes."

"Where are you goin'?"

"The stage runs into Saco. I can catch the train there. But I'm waiting in Saco for twelve hours, Jim. Then, if you don't come to me, I'm going home to my folks in Ohio."

"An' if I come?"

"Then we will be married. We're going to San Francisco. We can get a boat there and go to South America. But if you do ride to Saco, Jim, remember this: Come without your guns."

"I'll be there, girl."

"Leave with me now," she pleaded.

He shook his head.

"Then you will risk your life for the people who hate you? You are

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going against the guns of Ben Matson?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

He said, "Call it my pride."

She said, "Goodby, Jim," and left.

SOMETHING inside said, *Go with her, Jim. Sure, she is only a woman. There are thousands of women, millions of them. But she's all gold. She'll stand by you until she draws her last breath. Go with her, Jim Porter.*

But that would be running, another voice whispered. *And you cannot run. These townspeople look to you for protection. Otherwise they never would have sent for you. They hate you, yes, and they fear you. But you are the only human standing between their safety and the guns of Ben Matson.*

Go, Jim Porter, go.

Only cowards run, Jim Porter. If you ran, you would have to live with your cowardice the rest of your life. It would always be in your thoughts. Where is your pride, Jim Porter?

Go, Jim, go.

No, Jim Porter.

His stern face registered the keenness of his inner struggle. Methodically he saddled his buckskin. The hostler entered and stared at the dead Corey.

"Did you kill him, Jim?"

"I did."

"He was a fast gunman." The old man had known Jim all Jim's life. His puckered eyes studied Jim wonderingly. "There's the stage leavin', Jim."

"I can hear, old man."

"Connie's on that stage. I saw her get into it. That stage is takin' her away from you."

Jim spoke sternly. "Go down to the Silver Bird. Tell Ben Matson I've killed Corey. Tell Matson I'm comin' after him. Hurry, old man!"

NOW he was moving down Main street. The evening breeze, whipping in from the mountains, was cool against him. The lamps in stores threw rectangles of light across the sidewalk, and he moved through these. He saw the dark shadows of people watching him from doorways. He heard their low whispers as he passed.

These sounds registered, but he paid them no heed.

Only one thing matters now, Jim Porter. Kill Ben Matson and then ride to Saco and Connie. Go to her without your guns. Go, Jim Porter.

He loosened his Colts in holsters. The feel of the heavy grips flowed through him and became lost in him. Never again would he loosen them preparatory to a gunfight. That thought, then, was satisfying.

Ben Matson came out of the Silver Bird then. Matson saw him and he came toward him, heavy form bulking against the night. They came forward this way, and then they halted. Matson's voice was heavy.

"Jim Porter?"

"Yes."

Matson lifted his guns now, and they ran red. Their flames moved across darkness and pounded into a building behind Jim Porter. Now Jim Porter's guns were up and they kicked back against his palms. Then Jim Porter stood there, and waited.

Matson fell to his knees. He dropped both guns, and braced himself against a building. He stood there for a long moment, fighting death. And Jim Porter waited, his face stoney.

Matson fell forward then, and died.

Men were moving out on the street now, and Doc Snell came up to Jim Porter. He said kindly, "You'd better leave now, Jim."

"Thanks, doc."

Jim Porter turned, and went to the livery. He unbuckled his badge and his guns and handed them to the old hostler.

"The badge goes to banker Hanson," he said. "You can keep the guns, old man."

"But why, Jim?"

Jim Porter smiled. "You'll never know."

He mounted his buckskin. He rode toward Saco.

THE END

OWLHOOT TRAIL FOR ★ ★ A NESTER ★ ★

By William P. Brothers

(Author of "Printer's Ink at Queen City," "The Deputy Was A Dude," etc.)

"You're washed up, Ashburn, and if I tell what I know about what you did in Montana, you'll stretch rope. Are you ready to play smart and ride with me tonight?"

TURNING the plow over on its side, Tom Ashburn watched Clay Martin come closer. Pushing his battered range hat back on his tanned forehead, he scowled deeply, wondering what Martin wanted.

"Heard someone burned your barn last night," Martin said.

Tom's eyes narrowed to tiny slits. He was awakened last night by the crackle of flames. When he looked out, his barn was a mass of fire. It was the only wooden building he had.

"Gil Morgan hates nesters," Martin said.

Tom knew Gil Morgan, owner of the Bar-C, hated nesters, and he wasn't particular about concealing it. But until he had proof—besides, Gil Morgan's way was riding down with thundering hooves and blazing guns, not sneaking up in the night.

"I lost my hay and most of my equipment," Tom said curtly.

He didn't like Martin. He didn't like his beady eyes, the slinking droop of his mouth. Martin had money, but never worked. He spent his time playing poker in the Palace Saloon, but was no professional gambler. He played cattlemen against nesters, at the same time professing friendship to both.

Tom felt like taking the man by the collar and saying, "Listen, mister, state your business and move!" But that would be going back to the old days. He couldn't go back! He was an honest homesteader now. He couldn't forget that—ever!

"You're doin' all right here, Tom," Martin said slowly. "Why in a couple years, you'll have this place proved up like nobody's business."

Tom grunted and crumbled a clod of earth between his fingers. Sure, he thought, in a couple of years. If range war doesn't come bustin' loose and wipe me out. The snakes that burnt my barn wouldn't have to do much more.

He turned toward his sod shack. Suddenly he wondered if Martin had anything to do with burning his barn. Martin bought land now and then when he could get a good piece for practically nothing. The muscles of his jaw hardened to knots.

"You got a mighty nice place here, Tom," Martin said. "A mighty nice place."

Tom suddenly wondered if Vickie Adams thought so, too. He remembered she hadn't been over for nearly two weeks. He missed her, missed seeing her soft brown hair, her full, red lips, her soft curved young face.

"A man ought to be mighty proud to take a piece of wild land and make things grow," Martin said, half to himself.

Quit stalling, Martin, Tom thought. *Sure it's a nice place. Haven't I worked from sun up till dark seven days a week for the last two years and put every dollar I had in it? Haven't I froze here in winter and cooked here in summer? A nice place! There's enough blood and sweat to make the crops grow without a drop of rain!*

"Yup," Martin said, "I guess it keeps a man pretty busy and pretty broke, too."

Tom grunted in assent. Broke, hell! He couldn't remember when he had a dollar that didn't go for something badly needed. He was running on a shoestring, and the shoestring was near breaking.

All it would take, he thought grimly, *was a little more range war, if that's what burnt his barn. A tension was growing between the ranchers and the nesters. It would take only a spark, and the dry tinder of bloody range war would flame, sweeping the country with hot lead and spilled blood.*

"Truth of the matter is, Kid," Martin went on easily, "you and I could help each other in lots of ways."

Tom spun abruptly on his heel. He gripped the table top, knuckles white. In a voice almost a whisper, he said, "The name's Tom Ashburn. Don't call me 'Kid' Martin."

"Why five years ago, you was known to lots of people as the 'Kid'," he said coolly. "I'll bet some people in Montana would still remember yuh."

TOM cursed inwardly. There were things a man couldn't get away from, even working for years on a wild spot of land. Montana was a long ways away, but he still couldn't escape.

Martin met his eyes coldly. "I'm offering yuh a job, Kid," he said. "A good job. Not like turnin' over sagebrush land all day with a plow. It's easier and pays more!" He said the last words with slow deliberateness. There was no mistaking his meaning.

"Go tuh hell, Martin," Tom said huskily. "Yuh don't know me from Adam. I ain't working for no one!"

"It'd be easy tuh go under here, Kid," Martin said softly. "I think yuh should stick to homesteadin', but yuh can't prove if you're dead broke. Yuh'd lose everything."

Their eyes met dangerously. "Yuh

don't know me, Martin," Tom said hoarsely.

Martin moved across the room. He spoke like the crack of a whip. "No, but people in Montana do, Kid. Certain people in Montana would give a lot to know where you are!"

Tom went to the wooden bunk and sat on the edge. He buried his face in his hands. There was no escaping, no way out. Martin had him cold. They both knew it.

He'd been a kid in Montana, but he was greased lightning with a gun. For a year he'd run owlhoot. At night he became the "Kid," his real identity known only to the other four in the gang. A bank, a stagecoach, it was easy—until he murdered his own brother in cold blood!

He quit the gang when he found who he'd killed. Maybe luckily, because the sheriff winged one, that man confessed and they got the others. They identified Tom before they were stretched on a rope. But by that time, he was far away.

His notoriety spread like wildfire after he'd gone, partly because of his lightning draw, partly because he'd murdered his own brother, and partly because he was the only one who'd escaped. Escaped! He could never escape. He knew that now. You can't run away from yourself!

Martin went on. "And that's not sayin' what ranchers and the like would think if they knew. They'd be mighty surprised, Kid. Even Vickie Adams would be mighty surprised."

Tom stood up, anger flaming. "Since I left Montana, I ain't never packed a gun. And I don't ever intend to again!"

"I could use a draw like yours, Kid," Martin said.

"I ain't hittin' the owlhoot again," Tom said. "Get that and get it straight."

"One good job, Tom, and we'd both be fixed," Martin said.

Tom turned, his face ashy and his breath coming in short gasps, "Get out, you lop-eared polecat. Get out and stay out!"

Martin had been sure of himself before. Now he backed toward the door. He saw Tom's hands clench and unclench, the knuckles white. Steel sparks jumped from his slate-grey eyes.

"I'll be waitin' your answer in town," he said. "And I'll only wait till sundown tomorrow. Remember, Kid. Sundown tomorrow!"

TOM stood in the sod shack long after Martin had gone. Gradually the anger died away, and the old, sick feeling returned. He should have killed Martin. But it was no use. Another killing wouldn't do any good. There were some things you couldn't get away from. Some things there was no escaping.

Martin would wait. If he didn't come....the news would spread like prairie fire. Charlie Adams would tell his daughter, Vickie. Charlie Adams was the only cattleman around he could call friend. They had gotten along well.

Charlie Adams remembered range wars too well. He did everything in his power to smooth the differences between the nesters and the cattlemen. He knew it only led to blood, bullets and tombstones on boothill. He had countered Clay Martin's underhanded talk with sound advice of live and let live.

Old Charlie even encouraged Vickie to ride down and see Tom. He liked the young homesteader, who seemed to be hacking farm land out of prairie. And Vickie liked Tom, too.

Tom was skeptical. He got to town seldom, because he was always broke. Vickie was being courted ardently by Lance McCrae, her dad's foreman. What chance did he, Tom, have?

He remembered the last time she'd ridden out to see him. He'd been sitting, smoking. It was nearly dark.

"Hello, stranger," she said jokingly.

"Hello," he countered.

"We expected you Sunday. You didn't come."

Something about talking to Vickie made indescribable emotions surge within him. The soft curve of her

cheek, the light brown of her hair. He wanted to reach and touch her.

"Dad was wondering if you needed help," she said. "It's hard homesteading on a shoe-string."

He would never accept help from Charlie Adams, but it made a warm feeling come over him.

Together they sat and talked until late. He rode home with her. Later, he dreamed impossible dreams. He imagined working a homestead with her.

But that was crazy. She didn't give two cents for him. She was Lance McCrae's girl. She was just being nice.

He thought about Vickie and his heart sank. He'd hit the trail, and two years work homesteading would be gone. He cursed his blind stupid ways when he was scarcely more than a button.

If he wore hardware for Martin, it would start all over again. Sooner or later, they'd get caught, and then what? Maybe it was just as good. If the smouldering range war was touched off, he knew, in spite of Charlie Adams' help, he'd be wiped out. A range war would ruin him.

TOM threw a saddle on his lanky range horse the next day and started for town. He hated Martin, but was heading for trouble if Martin told. Heading for a hangman's noose in Montana!

Tom tied his horse by the long watering trough and nodded to Sheriff Hines and his deputy who were in earnest conversation.

"....and we'll meet the stage at Stoney Pass," the Sheriff was saying. He stopped abruptly as Tom approached, not wanting to be overheard.

It sounded strange, but Tom decided it wasn't his business. He had to find Martin and get the score settled. Maybe Martin had already blabbed. Martin held the cards and he had to see the hand dealt.

In the rear of the Palace Saloon, Martin was at his usual place. He didn't look up when Tom entered.

"Make up your mind, Kid?" he asked.

Tom smothered the anger that surged within him. "What's the play, Martin," he asked. "A stacked deck?"

"I need a gunman, Kid," Martin said.

"Get someone else. I ain't worn a gun since I been in Texas," he answered evenly.

"It wouldn't mean givin' up the homestead," Martin said. "You need money to keep your outfit runnin'. Bad luck, like some range war, would finish you."

Tom knew he was on his last legs. He'd worked hard and stretched his credit as far as it'd go. Involvement in any range war would ruin him. His proving meant more than almost anything to him. He'd spent two years of hard work, and he hated to lose it.

Two men came in and walked to the bar. Tom noticed one was Lance McCrae, Charlie Adams' foreman. He wondered what McCrae was doing in town this time of day. They had a drink and left.

"What do yuh say, Kid," Martin asked.

Tom clenched and unclenched his big hands. He knew he should wrap his strong fingers around Martin's neck and squeeze until his eyeballs popped.

"One, maybe two hauls," Martin said quietly. "You go back tuh homesteading with enough to tide yuh through."

Tom's mind raced. He couldn't escape the ghost of the owlhoot!

"Have a drink and think it over, Kid," Martin urged.

Outside, he walked aimlessly. If Martin talked, he'd have to pull stakes and hit the trail.

He heard short, running steps behind him. He turned and Vickie was coming toward him.

"Tom," she panted, "I've been chasing you for a full block. Are you trying to ignore me?" she asked with a smile.

"I'm sorry, Vickie," Tom answered. "I was thinkin'."

"I just wanted to say 'hello'," she said. "Lance brought me to town to-

day. I wanted to invite you over for dinner Sunday."

"That's mighty fine, Vickie," Tom said. "I sure got a hankering for some good home-cooked grub."

"I thought you would," she said.

"Tom — Tom, there's another thing," she said.

"What's that?"

"Lance just said you were talking to Clay Martin."

Tom's anger surged. McCrae ought to keep his mouth shut.

"What if I was?" he answered heatedly.

"Everyone knows what Clay Martin is," she said significantly. "You can't let people get a chance to say things like that about you. You can't afford to."

"Afford to!" Tom said bitterly. "I couldn't afford a ten-cent cigar. I ought tuh stand a little gossip."

"Tom," Vickie started. "I didn't mean...."

"Didn't mean that I was stone broke," he finished for her. "If Lance McCrae would mind his own business, instead of mine...."

"But Tom," she said, "you must be careful."

"Careful!" Tom exploded. "Be careful and some tin-horn burns your barn. Is that what you mean?" He laughed bitterly and thought of the proposition Martin offered him. "Does it pay to be careful?"

"I thought you might like some friendly advice," she said, suddenly cold.

"Advice is one thing that's plenty free in this town," he said.

"Maybe I shouldn't have spoken," Vickie said icily.

"Maybe not," Tom burst out.

She turned and walked away, her chin trembling.

TOM watched her go with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Damn Lance McCrae, he thought.

He continued up the street. Outside Ike Fineberg's store, he leaned against a hitching post. McCrae suddenly came out of the store.

"Hi, there, sod-buster," McCrae greeted him.

It fell like ice-water on Tom. Anger surged before his eyes. McCrae, a good-looking, smiling youngster, was young to be Charlie Adams' foreman. Damn him, Tom thought.

"How's the garden of Eden in the prairie coming," Lance joked.

"None of your damn' business," Tom said, his eyes glowering.

"What you cookin' with Clay Martin," Lance asked lightly. "You and him was thick as thieves in the Palace today. People'll be sayin' things...."

He never finished. Tom's right fist lashed up and caught him full in the face, spinning the young puncher around.

Tom closed in with hammering fists. All the pent up anger against Clay Martin came out in his slashing blows. McCrae went down in the dust.

He stood back as McCrae picked himself up and came forward. The cowpuncher was wiry, and for a few brief moments, traded blow for blow.

Bringing his fist up from waist high, he caught McCrae on the point of the jaw. The puncher went sprawling in the dusty street. He tried to rise and couldn't.

Tom looked up and saw Vickie Adams staring at him. Her mouth was drawn into a thin, tight line and her eyes blazed with well-bred fury. He looked for a moment and his gaze faltered.

He could give Clay Martin his answer now. Vickie wasn't his girl, at least, not now. He'd been a fool to think those things about her. She was Lance McCrae's girl. What chance did a sod-buster like him have?

He'd hit the owlhoot. Martin said it'd only be a couple of jobs, and they'd quit. He'd get enough to weather him till his crops produced. He'd go to hell before he'd lose his homestead or see it overrun by cattle!

Clay Martin saw the answer in Tom's eyes before he sat down. He motioned to the bartender for a bottle.

"You in, Kid?" he asked.

"Count me in," Tom said huskily. "We'll drink to the partnership,

Kid," Martin said, filling two glasses.

"Don't call me 'Kid', Martin."

"All right—Tom," Martin said.

"Mud in your eye."

Martin looked up quickly. He didn't like Tom's tone and he frowned, but made no comment. He'd won the first hand.

"What's the job," Tom asked abruptly.

Martin lowered his voice. "There's money—big money—coming through on the stage. They're keeping it in the bank tonight. Figure it ain't safe to travel with it at night, although they don't get here till way after dark."

"What about the Sheriff," Tom asked.

"That's it," Martin grinned slowly, meaningly. "Us and the boys tags the stage before it gets here. And the Sheriff stays up all night."

Tom grunted in assent. Martin had it all figured out. He cursed Martin silently under his breath.

"I'll see yuh at your place tomorrow, Kid," Martin said. "We got long ridin' tuh do."

EARLY the next afternoon, the two men left Tom's proving. Martin rode easily, leading the way out of Red Valley, into the hills of the Stony Mountains.

It was nearly dark and the two were covered with dust and sweat. Martin wheeled his horse into a small draw and they came upon an old prospector's shack, hidden until the rider was upon it.

Martin drew up his horse and whistled twice. A fat, grizzled man poked his head out of the cabin, and advanced in the open, holstering his gun.

Tom knew this man was a killer. He searched out of the corner of his eyes, furtively down the trail to see if the newcomers had been followed. He limped slightly and his arm crooked naturally so his hand was scarcely inches from his gun.

"Who's the hombre?" he asked querulously, nodding to Tom.

"Tom Ashburn," Martin explained. "Five's better than four on this job."

"Things divide easier four ways," the man countered. "I don't like strangers on business like this!"

"So you're aimin' tuh do what, fatty?" Tom said contemptuously.

The man's brow beetled darkly and he advanced, head thrust forward and fists clenched in hard knots. "I don't like your talk, stranger," he said.

Tom stood, feet planted wide, muscles taut and alert, ready.

Martin stepped up, pushing them apart. "Shut up, Keel," he snapped. "We got work to do."

So the fat one was Keel, Tom thought. He'd remember that.

Inside the shack, Tom's eyes swept the room. The fourth wall was dug out of the mountain, and a crude stone fireplace was used for heat, light and cooking.

At a table in the center of the room, two men sat over the dirty dishes of a finished meal. One, with a dark face and straight black hair studied Tom quizzically. He reminded Tom of a rat he'd once seen on the river wharves at St. Louis.

The other was a redheaded man. Little veins stood out thickly on his nose and cheeks, evidence of years of heavy drinking.

Tom suddenly hated the men. He remembered the owlhoot in Montana. It was the same here. Men, these were, who couldn't step into the light of day without the fear of seeing a posse riding up the trail.

"You're Tom Ashburn," the rat-faced man said. "Heard you been havin' bad luck."

"I do all right," Tom answered evenly.

"I pick up news in town that your barn got burned, your girl's goin' to marry a guy named McCrae, and because you beat up a puncher, Gil Morgan's been threatening to go over with some of his boys and wipe you out."

The thought stabbed into Tom like a knife. Vickie going to marry McCrae, and Gil Morgan riding on the nesters. He knew he wouldn't be the only one once Morgan's men got started. *I'll play this game through, Martin,* Tom thought. *After this*

job, I'm through, come hell, high water or nester-hatin' cattlemen.

His thought was suddenly interrupted. Keel grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. "I was talkin' to yuh, hombre," he rasped. "I ain't used to bein' ignored!"

Tom saw the fat man's face leering into his. He brought his fist up and smashed it against Keel's yellow teeth. The fat man grunted and staggered back. With the cry of a bull, he charged.

In spite of his appearance, Keel was quick and strong as an ox. His first blow glanced off Tom's shoulder, spun him around. By instinct, he ducked to one side and felt Keel's other fist nick his ear.

Tom spun quickly and smashed a solid blow behind Keel's ear as the fat man passed him. Keel grunted heavily and went down on one knee.

Before he could rise, Martin stood between them, gun drawn. "I'll plug the next one that moves!" he rasped. "There's work to be done tonight. We need every man."

KEEL looked at the gun in Martin's hand, then turned to Tom. "I'll get yuh for that, stranger," he said hoarsely. He wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand; it came away red and sticky. "People don't swing at me and live to talk about it."

"Shut up, Keel," Martin snapped.

Martin turned to the other two who sat quietly by, a half grin on their faces as they looked at Keel. "Come on, we're riding," he said.

"We meet the stage at Stony Pass," Martin told Tom dryly.

Tom knew where the stage road led through Stony Pass. The place wasn't far. They had ridden several miles out of their way to meet at this miner's shack. The pass was dotted with big boulders, making an ambush easy.

It was now dark, and as they rode, Tom dropped to the rear. He didn't want Keel behind him. The fat man, he knew, would shoot him rather than miss a meal. Keel wasn't particular about circumstances. It would be in the back, and with no warning.

Tom followed the shadowy figures in front of him. A large moon pushed over the hills and bathed the mountains in a dark, eerie light. He thought of Vickie and Charlie Adams. If Gil Morgan was riding tonight, like the rat-faced man said, two years work on his proving was gone. He hated the owlhoot but it seemed the only way.

Suddenly he knew he couldn't quit after one job with this bunch. Clay Martin would lead him on, telling him just one more, holding an added threat over his head. He'd soon be living and thinking like Keel and the others.

He thought of Stony Pass and it flashed across his mind. What he had overheard the Sheriff say in Smoke City: "....and we meet the stage at Stony Pass." He cursed himself inwardly. Why hadn't he thought.

There would be blood shed at Stony Pass tonight. If Martin's gang ambushed the whole posse, they wouldn't get away, only kill ten or twelve of the sheriff's volunteers before they, themselves were killed.

He knew he had to stop the holdup. But he didn't know how. Four against one. He'd be stopping lead and riding dangerously close to boothill tonight.

The figures in front of him drew up. Martin motioned him alongside.

"There's the pass," he said, pointing to the thin coach trail that ribboned itself in the moonlight below. "We'll leave the horses here. When the coach comes, I'll down the lead horse to stop her."

"Ashburn," he motioned to Tom, "will cover the guards while Keel gets the strongbox. You two," he motioned to the redhead and the rat-faced man, "will keep the guards in your sights."

Very neat, Tom thought quickly. Martin couldn't have figured it out better. Only Martin didn't reckon with the posse.

Crouching low against a boulder, Tom wished the moon wasn't so

bright. A vague plan was shaping in his mind.

Then he heard the sound of horses hooves against the stone. The stagecoach was coming. But he could tell from the sound that there was no posse with it—yet. He would have to work fast!

Slipping from his hiding place, he crept to the boulder where he knew the rat-faced man was hiding. Tom was on him before he heard. Before he could turn, Tom smashed the barrel of his gun on the base of the man's skull. The man gave a grunt and slid forward, his face in the sand.

Tom started to where the redhead was hiding. His heart beat a steady trip-hammer against his ribs.

Suddenly Keel yelled. He suspected something wrong. Tom fired a shot toward the boulder where Keel crouched. He heard it richochet from the rock and Keel cursed. Ahead, Martin yelled, but the stage had been warned.

Martin was on his feet, cursing hoarsely and coming toward them. Tom aimed and he saw dirt kick up twenty feet behind Martin. He'd missed!

ACROSS the road, Keel fired and dirt splashed against his boot. Tom fired again at Martin coming down the road. saw him stagger, arms outstretched, and fall.

Keel's shots were well placed and getting close. He moved behind another rock and saw the redheaded man peering over, trying to locate him. The man spun and fired as Tom triggered his gun.

He felt a scaring painstab through his chest. The redheaded man sprawled with a bullet in his forehead. Keel was coming across the road. Tom felt his gun jump and roar and saw Keel stop suddenly, then come forward again. He triggered again and again. Keel lurched violently each time but kept coming.

My God, Tom thought, *how much can the man take?*

Keel's gun flamed in the moonlight and Tom spun around by the impact. Hot fire started at his shoulder and ran the full length of his arm.

Then between the roar of the guns, he heard the thundering hooves of the posse—he had to get away.

He triggered again at Keel, but the hammer clicked sickeningly on an empty shell. He dropped to his knees and searched for the redhead's gun. It was still clenched in his fist.

Tom jerked it free and fired two more shots at Keel, scacely five feet away. The fat man stopped, stood unsteadily, his feet far apart, his arms hanging apelike at his sides. In the moonlight, Tom could see blood and saliva running from his mouth.

Then he pitched forward awkwardly, his arms groping. Tom stepped back. The fat man fell forward on his face.

Tom started for the horses, but found he could hardly walk. He put his hand against his shoulder and it came away warm and sticky.

He staggered among the boulders, away from the trail. It seemed to him it was getting darker, the moon was going behind a cloud.

His legs gave out and he sagged behind a rock, hoping the posse wouldn't find him, fighting against the pain and darkness that threatened to sweep over and engulf him.

He heard the hoarse shouts as the posse found Martin's body. "Here's another," someone yelled as they found Keel.

Tom forced himself to walk. He staggered blindly up the hillside where the horses were. He had to reach his proving. Had to stop Gil Morgan. Pulling himself in the saddle, he raked the lanky range horse with his spurs.

He was weak and in no condition to ride, but if Morgan was riding for nesters tonight, he'd have to kill Tom Ashburn before he wrecked his proving.

Tom figured vaguely he could make his proving in three hours. He and Martin had ridden leisurely and taken nearly six and had gone out of their way. He could make his proving, with luck, and if he could stay conscious.

The big horse was racing at dangerous speed over the rugged country. Tom heard the crack of a six-shooter and felt a bullet fan his hair. The posse had heard him leave and sent men in hot pursuit.

He gave the horse its head and raked him with spurs again. The animal leaped forward even faster, cutting in and out between boulders, leaping small arroyos. Tom held on the best he could. His arm and chest sent fiery pains through his whole body.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw three horsemen silhouetted against the sky and moon. They were afraid of riding fast in the darkness over rugged country. A wild hope surged through him. He might lose them—if he could hold out.

If he could hold out! His head was light and dizzy and he couldn't move his arm. The rest was nightmare. It seemed an endless night, where his body was racked with pain as if he were burning.

TWICE he regained consciousness and found his horse had slowed to a walk. Twice he raked the animal with spurs and plunged on again, holding blindly to the saddle.

When he awoke again, the sun was streaming in his face and he still sat astride the horse. He was alone. His tongue was parched and his lips caked and cracked. He wasn't more than a mile from his proving.

As he neared the place, he knew he was too late. His sod shack no longer existed. From the appearance, someone had planted dynamite inside and concussion had leveled it to the ground.

He sat bleakly on his horse and looked at what remained. Gil Morgan and his waddies had been there last night. He looked at the ashes of the burned barn. This was the end, the finish of two years' work.

The riders were a quarter mile away before Tom saw them. Gil Morgan and his boys were back to finish the job, he thought. He forced his arm toward his gun, fighting violent pain.

"Let 'em come," he muttered savagely. "I'll give them hot lead for their trouble.

Then the darkness was surging up against him, he felt himself falling....

When he awoke, he was aware of strange surroundings. Charlie Adams leaned over his bed.

"That was a plumb fool crazy thing to do," he said, "running away like that. Yuh lost a heap of blood."

"Martin...." Tom started, wondering if Martin had told.

"Martin's dead," Charlie Adams said briefly. "You earned a mighty good name for yourself around these parts by tackling them killers single handed up at the pass. We wondered how yuh guessed it was Martin that burned your barn. Why, I guess I don't know."

Tom knew. Martin wanted to force him to ride owlhoot. Tom tried to speak, but was cut off.

"I know, I know" Charlie Adams said, "but the rest of them don't know and never will. I was the only one that talked to Martin before he died, and in the excitement, I sorta forgot what he said."

The door opened and Vickie Adams came in the room, smiling.

"Some folks," he went on, "are thinkin' that Gil Morgan and his waddies didn't do the right thing when they busted up your homestead. Seein' as you're the country hero around these parts, why folks just figured tuh have your homestead fixed up right proper when yuh go back. Till then, you're stayin' right here."

Charlie Adams looked up and met his daughter's eyes.

"All right, gal," he said, "I'll go. I guess I know where I ain't wanted."

THE END

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE IRON BRONC

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(Continued From Page 68)

when he reached the beginning of the broken region.

He slowed the mare to a trot and searched the terrain ahead and on either side of the road carefully. He could see nothing, but there were numerous deep gulches along the way that would afford perfect concealment for men and horses.

The road wound around the base of a hill and dipped suddenly into a wide dry wash lined with willows on either bank.

Pat reined to the right off the road into the bottom of the dry wash. It was deep enough to hide him from sight as he rode up a hundred yards and around a bend that put him out of sight of the road.

He dismounted and ground-tied the mare, pulled his carbine from its leather boot suspended from the saddle, and crept up over the north bank of the wash cautiously.

He parted the thick growth of willows and peered out, nodded with satisfaction as he discovered his recollection of the terrain had been good and he was directly south of a high, rocky knoll that looked out over the entire expanse of rough country.

He pushed through the willows and bent forward to make his way up to the top of the knoll, dropping to his hands and knees as he neared the top, then to his belly, wriggling forward until he could see over and get a clear view of the road.

Only the upper half of the sun was visible as he settled himself in a comfortable position on his belly with his short rifle thrust out in front of him and resting on a boulder for steady shooting.

He realized he was letting Sam Sloan take a terrific chance in riding unwarned into a possible ambush, but this was the best way Pat could figure to handle the situation. He couldn't warn Sam of possible danger without telling him everything he suspected, and he was loath to do that. He might so easily be wrong. If nothing happened, it would ruin everything to have told Sam. It was better this way. Sam would have to take his chance with possible dry-gulchers. He'd ridden into worse danger before and come out unscathed. On top of the knoll with his saddle-gun ready, Pat was in a commanding position to take a hand in any trouble that might arise.

He didn't want to scare them off if they were hidden below there waiting for the Pony Express rider to come dashing through. The entire success of his plan depended on having them feel safe to attack Sam as he rode by. It was sort of making death bait out of Sam Sloan, but Pat knew Sam would be the first to approve if he knew why it was being done.

THE sun was below the western horizon now. A red glow still lingered in the sky, touching the landscape with a rosy hue that was remindful of blood.

There was a vast silence that seemed intensified by the approach of darkness. As far as Pat could see in any direction, he could not perceive a single moving thing. It was as though the world stood still, catching its breath in anticipation of the deadly drama about to unfold here on the road into Dutch Springs.

Not a superstitious man, Pat Stevens was deeply sensitive to the varying moods of nature, and he felt a sharpening of his perceptions, a tightening of his muscles as the sun sank lower behind the mountains and the blood-hue slowly faded from the silent land.

Into that graying silence came the faint drumming of galloping hooves from the south. Pat felt a prickling sensation, as though the short hairs at the back of his neck were standing up. The sound came louder, like the faint rolling of distant thunder. He twisted his head and saw a black speck far off on the ribbon-like road.

The black speck grew swiftly larger and the pound of hoofbeats more tumultuous. Something inside Pat made him feel like standing up and waving his hat and shouting. He was seeing the first Pony Express rider in southern Colorado. The beginning of a new era in the West, and it made him feel glad and triumphant and tremendously proud all at once.

He could tell, now, that it was Sam Sloan, leaning forward over the neck of his racing horse, pacing him carefully over the ten-mile grind to make the maximum speed without breaking his wind.

Suddenly, horse and rider were lost to Pat's sight as the road dipped down into the wide arroyo behind him. Seconds later, they leaped into view on the other side, over a ridge at unslackened speed, then down a short slope to another dry wash.

Pat's gaze remained concentrated on the speeding mail rider, and every sense was alert. It wasn't taking long for Sam to dash across that dangerous half mile of broken country. If something didn't happen soon—

The crouching figure of Sam Sloan disappeared into another arroyo almost half a mile away. As he went out of sight Pat heard the sound he'd waited for and dreaded, yet hoped he'd hear. The sharp spang of a rifle.

Pat didn't breathe until horse and rider showed again on the other side. Sam was slewed sideways in the saddle and his six-gun was barking back at a point to his left and rear.

Two other horses surged out of the dry wash a little west from the road. The twilight was thick enough to show orange flame lancing from their guns leveled at the Express rider.

One of the pursuing riders rode in to the steady sights of Pat's rifle. He pressed the trigger gently and the rider went headlong into the dust.

The other was checking his plunging horse, turning to see from whence this new danger had come.

Pat had time for careful aim, and even in the murky half-light of dusk his bullet went where it was aimed.

The second rider faltered in the saddle, slumped forward and fought to regain his balance, then fell heavily to the ground. His horse trotted on away from him, and the man half arose as though to follow, and then drooped to the ground again.

The drumming of galloping hooves grew fainter. Sam Sloan was a barely discernible moving speck in the gathering dust. True to the traditions of the Pony Express, he had not slackened speed one instant. No matter how curious he might be, he carried the mail northward and nothing must be allowed to slow it up.

Pat got to his feet and trotted down the slope to his mare. He vaulted into the saddle and sent her back to the road, then northward.

She snorted nervously and shied away when they came to a figure crumpled in the dust of the road, the first of the dry-gulchers to cross Pat's rifle sights.

He steadied the mare and dismounted. Made a quick examination and found the man was quite dead. He rolled him over and nodded somberly when he recognized the dark, sneering features of a man known in Dutch Springs only as Mex Joe, a half-breed with a surly disposition and ready gun-hand who lived mostly by hunting and trapping and was suspected of many minor crimes.

PAT left Mex Joe lying in the road where he had fallen. He caught the reins of his mare and led her forward until he came on the second of the dry-gulchers.

Ben Larkin was nursing a shattered right shoulder and cursing loudly when Pat reached him. He was a burly black-mustached man who owned a small poverty-ridden spread a little east of Dutch Springs. He greeted the sheriff with a snarl of hatred when Pat said soberly, "What you doin' sittin' here in the road, Ben?"

"Yo're smart, huh?" roared the wounded man. "Layin' back there an' shootin' a man from behind. By Gawd, if I c'ud git holt of a gun I'd let you have it right now."

"You've done plenty of shootin' for one night," Pat told him. "Why don't you stand up?"

"Twisted my laig when I fell," Larkin muttered. "Cain't put my weight on it. You got me wrong," he whined. "I didn't mean no harm. Wuz jest funnin' when Mex Joe an' me thought we'd skeer Sammy with the mail."

"Who put you up to it?" Pat demanded shortly.

"Nobody. Honest to Gawd, Pat—"

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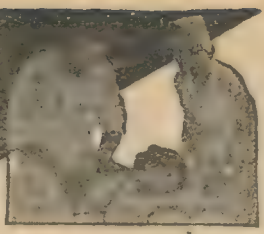

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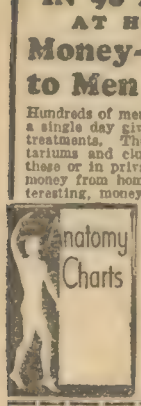

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Pat said, "Shut up. Only reason I didn't kill you was to leave you so you could talk. An' you're goin' to talk, Ben Larkin. Don't make no mistake about that." He turned and strode away to his mare, mounted and spurred her after Larkin's roan saddle horse.

He overtook the frightened animal a quarter of a mile down the road, dropped a noose over his head and led him back to Ben Larkin.

When Larkin began to whine for pity again, Pat slapped him savagely and told him to save his strength for a long time in jail. He hoisted the wounded man up into the roan's saddle, used a lariat and some half hitches to secure him so he wouldn't fall off, and set out at a gallow for Dutch Springs with the roan on a lead rope behind him.

CHAPTER XVI

IT WAS dark when Pat rode into Dutch Springs by a back street. He circled behind the bank and stopped in front of Doc Montgomery's house.

The doctor was eating supper when Pat knocked on the door. He was a paunchy, fat-cheeked man, and he invited the sheriff in to have supper with him when he saw who was at the door.

"Thanks, Doc." Pat shook his head. "Sorry to disturb you," he went on apologetically, "but I got a hunk of shot-up meat I wish you'd look at before I lock it up in jail."

Doctor Montgomery said, "I heard you were out after the bank robbers. Wait till I put on a coat." Pat waited while the doctor put on a coat and got a lantern. "Caught them, did you?" asked the doctor as he came out the door.

"Not exactly," Pat confessed. "Sort of, though."

The doctor gave him a benignly incurious glance. "Funny thing about that bank robbery. When they counted the money this morning there was exactly seven thousand four hundred and eighty-three dollars missing. All the rest of it right there." He cleared his throat and added apologetically,

"Some folks are trying to make something out of the fact that your friends, Sam Sloan and Ezra, had exactly seven thousand four hundred and eighty-five dollars on deposit."

Pat said disgustedly, "Ezra never was much good at countin' money. I'm s'prised he came that close."

He stopped beside the horse carrying the wounded man. "Here it is, Doc."

"Ben Larkin?" Doctor Montgomery muttered without undue surprise, holding the lantern up to survey the would-be dry-gulcher. "I knew you needed money for whisky, Ben, but I didn't know you'd hold up a bank to get it."

Larkin responded with an oath, and Pat explained, "He didn't do nothing that brave. It's more Ben's style to hide out by the side of a road an' shoot a man ridin' by. I've been tellin' Ben," he went on casually as the doctor stood on tiptoe to look at Larkin's wound, "that it's a mighty bad business interferin' with the United States mail. I reckon I'll have to turn him over to the U. S. Marshal, won't I?"

"I understand that's the law," Doc Montgomery told him absently. "This shoulder isn't too bad, Pat. Why don't you lock him up and let me finish supper? I'll come over to the jail and dress it."

"All right. Got to keep him alive for the Government so's they can string him up for botherin' with the mail."

"By all means," the doctor concurred heartily. "As a matter of fact, Pat, you and I would both be liable to arrest if we let him die through our negligence before the Government gets hold of him. That is, if he's been stealing mail."

"He tried to," Pat growled. "Same thing, I reckon. Took a pot-shot at the Pony Express tonight."

"I keep tellin' you I wasn't tryin' to steal the mail," Ben Larkin burst out. He wasn't very bright, and had listened to their comment with growing apprehension.

"You can tell that to the U. S. Marshal," Pat said curtly. "Thanks Doc, for lookin' him over." He led

(Continued On Page 90)

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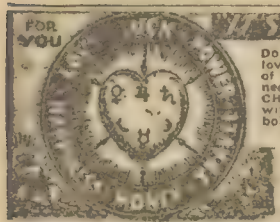

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(Continued From Page 89)

his mare and Larkin's roan toward the jail.

The jail door was standing open. Pat struck a match and stepped inside, saw that Jeth Purdue's body had been taken away and only a smear of blood remained on the dirt floor.

He went out and untied Larkin, let him slide off to the ground, then dragged him inside the cell.

"I'm leavin' you here to think it over," he announced. "If you want to get out of bein' turned over to the U. S. Marshal an' maybe gettin' strung up for tryin' to steal the mail, you'd better tell the truth about why you tried to dry-gulch Sam Sloan. That'll be a jail sentence, but it ain't a hangin' offense."

THERE were twice as many saddled horses and vehicles on Main Street as Pat could recall ever seeing on a Saturday night. Pat stopped and stared down the street in astonishment when he turned into the block from the jail. He wondered what the hell had drawn all these people into town on a weeknight. His face cleared suddenly and he nodded to himself. Of course. It was the inauguration of the Pony Express route through Dutch Springs that had been the magnet.

All the saloons were crowded.

Pat sauntered up to the Gold Eagle and pushed the swinging doors open. He stopped just inside the door and grinned widely when he saw John Boyd teetering back and forth as he

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tried to stand erect on a table in the rear. John was a near neighbor of Pat's, a steady-going industrious rancher except on occasions like this when he was likely to get too much.

Right now, John Boyd was pretty drunk, and he was hell-bent on making a speech to the crowded saloon.

He was saying, "Lishen now. I wanna hear three cheers for Sham Sloan. Three loud ones. Hesh the boy that carried the mail. Lesh give him three cheers."

He lifted his arm and waved it, and men laughed and responded with shouts and cheers.

Then Pat saw Sam Sloan. He had Harold Morgan drawn to one side and was arguing fiercely with the deputy Pat had left in charge of the sheriff's office. His dark face was tight with anger and he was talking loudly to Morgan who kept smiling and trying to back away from him.

John Boyd fell off the table as the cheering died down, and laughing men caught him and helped him to the bar. Pat began threading his way through the hilarious throng, unnoticed as he went toward Sam and Harold Morgan.

But other men were beginning to notice the scene, and were crowding in on the two to hear what the argument was about.

When he got a little closer, Pat heard Sam saying savagely, "You got to do it, Morgan. I'm tellin' you. It cain't wait till Pat gets here."

"Go on and have another drink," Morgan insisted good-naturedly. "You don't know what you're talking about. Why, you're the hero of Dutch Springs tonight, Sam. I can't arrest you."

"You got to." There was almost a sob in Sam's voice. "I tell you I got to be arrested 'fore Pat gets here."

"I'm already here." Pat announced loudly.

MEN looked around in surprise and moved aside to make way for him to reach Sam and Morgan. There were knowing grins on the faces of most of the men, who

(Continued On Page 92)

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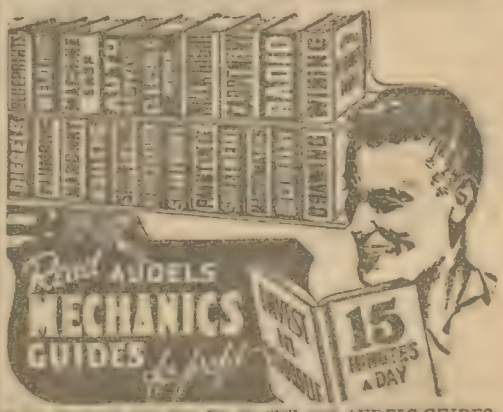

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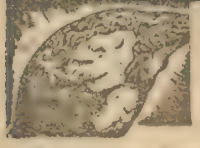
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(Continued From Page 91)

thought Sam was drunk and didn't know what he was saying.

Sam's jaw dropped when he saw Pat. He shook his head mournfully and said, "I wisht you'd stayed away, Pat. When you wasn't here when I hit town with the mail I thought maybe you'd got some sense in yore haid an' decided to stay out of town."

"Whew!" Harold Morgan breathed a sigh of relief and mopped sweat from his face. "I'm sure glad to see you, Pat. I reckon I'm undeputized, huh?"

"Not yet." Pat stepped past Sam and asked Morgan in a low voice, "What's the matter with him?"

"Says I got to arrest him." Morgan lowered his voice too. "I've been having the dangedest time trying to keep him shut up You told me I wasn't to let on to anybody about how he was tied up with the Jewel Hotel killing. But damn it, he's wanting to tell everybody."

"I told you to keep your mouth shut till I fixed things." Pat swung on Sam angrily.

"That's why I ain't gonna keep it shut," Sam defied him. "I've made my ride with the mail. That's all I wanted. Now I'm gonna tell the truth."

Men were edging close to listen again. Pat glanced around at them, and then demanded swiftly of Sam, "What you goin' to tell the truth about? That you had to fight off a couple of dry-gulchers on your way in with the mail?"

Sam scowled with amazement. "How'd you know about that?"

"What'd you think happened to 'em?" Pat asked sarcastically.

"Danged if I knew. That's why I didn't tell nobody. Thought mebby I'd gone to sleep an' dreamed it. Fust there was two of 'em shootin' at me —then they weren't there."

Pat said, "I happened to see it an' I picked 'em off with my rifle." He turned to the gaping crowd with a laugh. "Sam wanted to be locked up because he thought he'd done gone crazy an' was seein' things. Couple of coyotes tried to hold up the mail while he was bringin' it in, an' he never slowed up to see what hap-

pened to 'em." Pat turned back to Sam with another laugh. "An' I bet you haven't been up to the Jewel to let Kitty make over you for that ride," he bantered. He put his arm about the smaller man's shoulders and drew him toward the door, saying over his shoulder, "You come along too, Morgan. You're still deputized."

Sam weakly tried to argue, but Pat pushed him along, got him outside the crowded saloon As soon as the swinging doors closed behind the three, Pat said angrily, "You doggone near spoiled everything in there. Why can't you keep your big mouth shut?"

Sam said, "I ain't gonna let you do it, Pat."

"You're comin' up to the Jewel with me." Pat took him by the arm and pulled him along. Over Sam's head, he asked Morgan, "Has any of this stuff leaked out around town?"

"Nary a bit." Morgan shook his head. "Don't many people know a dude from Denver was killed last night. Those that do, think he killed himself. Far as I know, neither Kitty nor Deems have peeped a word about Sam. I reckon they'd be just as glad to keep it quiet."

"That's what I thought," Pat said grimly. "Nothin' new on Jeth, huh?"

"Not a dang thing, Pat. We missed our chance when we didn't keep those footprints outside the window from being messed up. People trampled all over them before I remembered how city detectives sometimes measure people's feet and find a pair that fit the prints."

"We should of thought of that last night," Pat agreed. "But I don't reckon it matters too much." He steered Sam in through the doorway leading into the lobby of the Jewel Hotel. The door into the adjoining saloon was open, and a lot of noise was coming from the overcrowded room.

PAT LET go of Sam's arm and said earnestly "Promise me one thing. Keep your mouth shut while I do some talkin'. If I can't get things fixed so everybody'll be happy,

(Continued On Page 94)

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(Continued From Page 93)

you can go ahead an' confess the murder of Fred Ralston all over town. But I'm still sheriff an' I'm runnin' this show. Don't you worry about me," he went on hastily when Sam opened his mouth to protest. "Harold Morgan knows all about everything. I'm not tryin' to do anything crooked. He'll be settin' in on it an' we'll let him be the judge of what's right. Is that fair enough?"

"I reckon so." Sam had to acquiesce because of Morgan's high reputation for probity. "But I'd ruther—"

"You ain't got your ruthers this time," Pat snapped. "Just keep your mouth plumb shut."

He turned to the clerk who had been listening with open mouth and goggle eyes. "Where's Miss Kitty an' Joe Deems?"

"In the saloon, I reckon. Most everybody in town's in there."

Pat strode inside the crowded saloon and looked around. He saw Joe Deems' saturnine face behind the bar, and beckoned to him. Joe came out, taking off a white apron. "I'm mighty busy passing out drinks," he grumbled. "Can't it wait?"

"This can't. It's waited too long. Where can we find Kitty?"

"Back end of the room."

Pat said, "Bring her into the lobby," and strode away before the hotel proprietor could argue with him further.

Sam Sloan was slumped back against the counter when Pat reappeared in the doorway. He regarded Pat glumly, and stiffened when he saw Joe Deems come through the doorway with Kitty on his arm.

Kitty lowered her head and avoided Sam's dark gaze. She had on more rouge than last night and her eyes held a defiant gleam when she looked at Pat.

He said, "I reckon you both know Sam. We're goin' upstairs."

Kitty started to speak, then went on past Pat silently but with heightened color. Sam drew back to let her pass, and nodded evenly to Deems. He muttered, "Hello, Joe," and tugged his Stetson lower on his forehead.

"What are we going upstairs for?"

Deems demanded of Pat. "I don't see that anything can be gained—"

"I think we'll settle this whole thing pretty fast. We'll all go up to number fifteen."

Pat waited for Joe and Kitty to precede them, then nodded to Morgan and Sam, and they went up together.

Deems and Kitty stopped outside the door of number 15. When the others came up to them, Deems explained, "Kitty moved out of this room last night. Except for that everything is just like it was when Ralston was murdered."

Pat said, "I reckoned she wouldn't want to keep on sleepin' in here. Not many women would." He stepped inside and struck a match, lit the lamp on the bureau.

"All of you come in," he invited the group waiting nervously on the threshold. "We ain't got any body, but there's some blood to show right where he was lying."

Kitty entered hesitantly. She held her head high and walked straight across the room like a sleep-walker. Sam followed her in. His dark face was grim and dejected, and he began angrily, "Damn it, Pat. Ain't none of this gonna do no good."

Pat said, "I think it will." He sounded very cheery as his gaze searched the ceiling and the front wall of the room.

When Deems and Morgan were inside, Pat explained to them, "There's two or three things I ain't got quite straight on this. Those chairs are still right where they were." He indicated the chairs on each side of the low table that had held the tray and whisky bottle the preceding night.

"That where you an' Kitty were sittin' when the man walked in on you?" he asked Sam.

SAM grimaced angrily, "Yeah. But—"

"That right, Miss Kitty?" Pat's voice was low but urgent.

She nodded lifelessly without looking at him. "Yes. We were sitting in those chairs having a drink. There wasn't anything—"

"That's plenty," Pat interjected

(Continued On Page 96)

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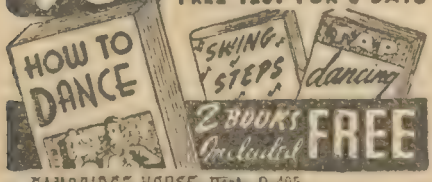

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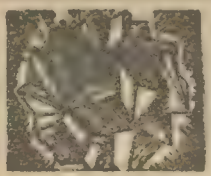

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(Continued From Page 95)

hastily. He took hold of Sam's arm and led him back to the chairs. "This fellow came in that door an' started cussin' you. That it?"

Sam nodded.

"An' Kitty screamed that he was her husband," Pat went on composedly, "an' he started for you, still cussin'. An' you figured he was lookin' for trouble so you pulled your shootin' iron an' triggered it two or three times?"

"I was too drunk to hit him," Sam protested weakly. "Even with him that close."

"Where'd the bullets go?" Pat asked quietly.

Sam stared at him in bewilderment. "In yonder wall, I reckon. Or up in the ceiling."

Pat said to Morgan, "Do you see any bullet holes in that wall or ceilin'."

"I sure don't," Morgan said excitedly.

"Nor in the floor nor no place else," Pat pointed out. "Funny kind of bullets, huh?" I never knew 'em not to hit some place before when they were shot out of a forty-five inside a closed room."

A moment of daed silence followed his drawled pronouncement. Then Deems offered sharply:

"He must have been too drunk to realize he'd hit Ralston. Probably jumped him with his knife before he could fall over. I bet you'll find those missing bullets inside Ralston's corpse."

Pat looked at Morgan. "How about it, Harold?"

The rancher cleared his throat and shook his head. "I was at the undertaker's when he laid the body out. He wasn't shot. Not even once. There were two knife holes. One in front and one in his back."

A startled exhalation of breath came from Kitty's red lips. She sank back on the bed and covered her face with her hands as Pat turned on her.

He studied her for a moment with compassion, then walked to the door and put his back against it.

"It's time all of us quit coverin' up things an' told all the truth," he warned them. "I'll start with my

part of it. You listen close, Sam. An' keep your big mouth shut till I ask you a question. You ain't goin' to like some of this, but you're goin' to hear it. Maybe you've already guessed," he went on to Deems and Kitty, "that I had a confab with Fred Ralston in my office last evenin' right after he got off the stage."

CHAPTER XVII

"THAT'S how-come," Pat went on calmly, "that Jeth Purdue got locked up in jail. He came in right after Ralston left my office, an' got wringy when I told him I'd decided to hold onto the sheriff's badge a few hours longer.

"Fred Ralston thought he was talkin' to the new sheriff," Pat went on carefully. "He'd never seen either one of us, an' he'd been told Purdue would be in charge of the sheriff's office when the stage came in. I didn't tell him different because I got plumb interested by the time he'd talked a little bit. He mentioned a plan that'd been cooked up between him an' Kitty an' Joe Deems. An' he mentioned a sucker with eight thousand cash money."

The Powder Valley sheriff paused and studied the occupants of the room one by one. Harold Morgan was listening with an intent frown, seeking to add up what Pat was saying to what he already knew. Sam Sloan had a black scowl on his face and was making a job of not looking at Kitty who was sitting erect on the bed, listening with strained attention.

Joe Deems cleared his throat and said angrily, "I don't know what all this foolishness is about. Sounds to me like you're making up a batch of lies. Fred Ralston is dead and can't speak for himself."

Pat said, "You know they're not lies, Joe. Even if I haven't got anybody to back me up, I got better proof. When Ralston came over here, he told you an' Kitty that he'd checked with the new sheriff an' everything was fixed. You were after Sam's money, an' I reckon you were goin' to split it four ways. Or maybe you an' your husband were goin'

(Continued On Page 98)

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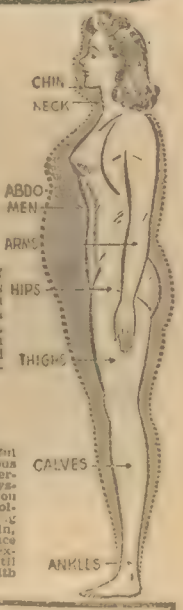

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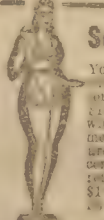

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(Continued From Page 97)

to get the biggest part," Pat added to Kitty. "Seein' how you'd worked it all out between you."

She wet her lips and sent an agonized glance at Sam who was staring down at the floor and sweating profusely. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said faintly. "I didn't have anything planned. I didn't know Fred was coming."

Pat laughed scornfully. "He asked the clerk for number fifteen. The room right next to yours. An' you had the door unlocked for him to walk in when you got things fixed right with Sam."

"I don't want to hear no more," Sam stepped forward angrily. "I killed Fred Ralston. I'm not denyin' it. Mebby I'll hang. I don't reckon it matters much. Why don't you lock me up?"

"That's right, Sheriff," Joe Deems broke in. "These absurd accusations of yours mean absolutely nothing. Sam Sloan confesses he killed Ralston. Nothing else matters."

"But, how did he kill him? There's those bullets that disappeared in thin air. In Powder Valley it makes a difference whether a man dies of lead-poisonin' or of gettin' knifed in the back. A hell of a difference to a jury," he added emphatically. "So I reckon we better find out about those missin' bullets."

"Mebby I didn't even shoot," Sam put in hoarsely. "Mebby I jest thought I did."

Pat shook his head. "Ezra heard the shots in this room. Three of 'em. He'll swear to that. Le's go back to yesterday afternoon. You drank some in the afternoon. Got kind of drunk, 'cording to what Ezra says. Then Kitty made up to you in the saloon an' suggested you come up to her room for a drink. Didn't she?"

When Sam set his lips grimly and didn't answer, Pat swung on the entertainer. "You admit that's what you did, don't you?"

"Sure I admit it," she cried wildly. "What of it? I told you yesterday I was crazy about Sam. I was—well, I was hoping he'd ask me to marry him."

"An' you already with one husband?"

"I—I thought maybe we could go away where Fred would never find us. I've never really been married to Fred. I hadn't seen him for years. I didn't think of him as my husband." Red suffused Kitty's face. She lowered her head and began to cry softly.

SAM took a step toward her, his dark face contorted with pain. Pat shook his head at him sharply. "Wait till you hear all of it, Sam. Then if you still feel the same way I won't say a word.

"Sam an' Kitty came up here for a drink," he went on harshly. "An' in the meantime, her husband had checked into the room next door. She knew that. She knew he was in there listenin' at the keyhole. He told me it was all planned out.

"She fed Sam some more whisky out of the bottle an' got him good an' drunk. They were in here drinkin' quite a while, as you can tell by countin' the brown-paper cigarette butts on the tray. An' you did get him to propose marriage," Pat went on angrily to Kitty. "You sweetened up to him while he was drunk, an' he started kissin' you. An' right then—your husband walked in."

Pat stopped and looked at Sam scornfully. "Can't you see it was a put-up job? Of all the times in the world for him to walk in just the minute you were kissin' Kitty. Not a minute too late or a minute too soon. She an' him had the whole thing planned," he went on remorselessly. "She'd been workin' you up to just that point for months. When she figured she had you ripe, she wrote to Denver for him to come on."

Kitty gave a little cry and sank sideways on the bed, covering her shamed face with her hands. Sam's face turned a grayish color and his mouth was clamped bitterly shut.

"Nothin' but the old badger game," Pat went on wearily. "With a few extra touches. They knew you an' Ezra were too tough to pay off just because you'd been caught kissin' a man's wife, so they fixed it for you

(Continued On Page 100)

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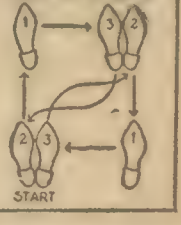

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(Continued From Page 99)

to think you'd killed him. That made it different. A killin' like that is awful close to murder—an' no man wants to get up in court an' have that kind of story told on him."

Joe Deems said coldly, "You've certainly worked out an amazing theory, Sheriff Stevens. Ralston would have been the biggest fool on earth to walk in here unarmed and provoke a man to shoot at him."

"Sure he would," Pat conceded quietly. "An' Fred Ralston wasn't that kind of fool. Not by a long shot." He swung on Sam. "Start thinkin' back. When you first come in with Kitty, she made some excuse to get hold of your gun, didn't she?"

Sam's face was haggard. He nodded slowly. "Come to think of it, she did. Claimed she wanted to look at it while I poured a drink. But she give it back to me right afterward," he added defensively.

"Sure she did. After she'd unloaded it.

"But it was loaded. It shot all right. Hell, you've got three of the cartridges in your pocket right now."

"That's right." Pat Stevens reached inside a pocket in his jacket and drew out the three bullets he'd taken from Sam's .45 that morning. A length of white lisle stocking came out with the bullets. Pat looked at it and grinned crookedly. He held it up by the top and asked Kitty, "Ever seen this before?"

She sat up slowly, taking her hands away from her face as though she dreaded to look. She began, "Why, it's one of my—" and stopped abruptly.

Pat nodded. "One of your good stockin's. Only, it ain't good for much now. Not with the foot cut off." He laid it aside. "We'll talk about that directly. Right now, we'll talk about these here bullets." He handed one of them to Sam and another to Harold Morgan, directing, "Try the heft of them."

BOTH of them began trying the weight of the bullets in the palms of their hands. Thoroughly familiar with .45 ammunition, a be-

mused expression quickly came over both their faces.

"Light as a feather, most," Morgan ejaculated. He held it up to examine it, then excitedly reached in his pocket for a knife.

"That's right," Pat encouraged him. "Try your knife on the bullet part. It's real light wood—painted over to look like lead. It'd fly all into little pieces if you tried to shoot it out of a gun. That's what Kitty put in your six-gun before she gave it back to you yesterday," he added to Sam. "Fred Ralston didn't reckon he was walkin' into no danger when he came in here. You were supposed to be so drunk you'd think he was dead when he fell down after you shot. But I reckon he didn't fall fast enough," he added grimly.

Deems was looking at Kitty in utter amazement. "Is this true, Kitty? Did you plan all that with your husband?"

"You were in on it too," Pat told him. "You an' Jeth both. They needed your help to put it over. What messed everything up," Pat went on stridently, "was Sam not being too drunk to notice Ralston didn't fall fast enough after he shot—and him havin' a huntin' knife in a leg sheath. I reckon you didn't know he always carried a knife too," he added to Kitty. "Or you'd tried to get that away from him before your husband came in."

"It was awful," she cried brokenly. "Everything went just right, but—before I could stop him Sam had that knife out in his hand and was going after Fred."

"I figured it happened like that." Pat sighed. "An' that clears up a lot of things. It would of been better," he added severely to Kitty, "if you'd left real bullets in Sam's gun. A jury might let him off for shootin' a man like that in the excitement, but stabbin' him in the back is goin' to be different. Just because of that," he ended sadly, "I reckon he'll swing from a cottonwood tree."

A spasm of horror contorted Kitty's face. "You don't—think they will?" she choked out.

"Plumb certain sure. He'll stretch

(Continued On Page 102)

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a rope—an' you'll go on livin', Miss Kitty. An' all your life you'll know 'twas your fault an' you should of hung instead of Sam."

"That's right," she cried wildly. "That's it! I killed Fred. If anyone hangs, I should. I stabbed him. Sam didn't. He just thought he did."

CHAPTER XVIII

AS KITTY concluded her astounding announcement, Pat nodded and muttered, "I didn't know whether it was you or Deems."

But Sam Sloan strode toward Kitty saying angrily, "Shut up. You got no right to say that. Nobody's goin' to b'lieve you."

Her eyes had come to life again as she looked up into his fiercely ugly face. "But it's the truth, Sam. You haven't killed anybody. I did it. And I'm glad," she added firmly.

Sam whirled on Pat and charged, "This is yore doin'. You scared her with talk about me hangin'."

Pat said, "That's what I figured to do—if she cared a damn about you."

"I'm sorry, Sam," Kitty said miserably. "When I did it I didn't expect you to get in trouble over it. We had everything fixed with Mr. Purdue. I didn't expect anyone to ever know."

"You couldn't of done it," Sam argued pathetically. "I recollect—"

"You recollect goin' after him with a knife," Pat cut in sharply. "Then you passed out—or thought you did. That's what you told me an' Ezra."

"But he was daid. Lyin' there on the floor with blood on him when Ezra come in."

"That was what Ezra was supposed to believe. Where'd you get the blood?" Pat asked Kitty.

"It was chicken blood. I sneaked a cup of it out of the kitchen before supper." Kitty sat erect and her face was composed now. Her voice was steady and she appeared glad that the strain was over.

"You didn't really pass out," Pat told Sam. "You got hit in the head an' knocked out."

Sam put his fingers up and uncer-

tainly felt the back of his head. "I never had nary a bump," he protested. "Like I tol' you—"

"That's where this comes in." Pat reached down and picked up the top part of Kitty's white lisle stocking. He dangled it before her eyes and demanded, "Isn't that it?"

She nodded and said calmly, "I wondered if you'd guessed."

"I didn't at first. Not until Sam told about the funny way he passed out all at once—an' how he woke up without a bump but with the whole back of his head aching.

"That's what happens when you get hit with a sandbag," he told Sam. "You pass out sudden an' it don't leave any mark—only a bad headache when you wake up. The bottom part of a stocking makes a good sandbag," he went on slowly. "You cut off the foot an' fill it half-full of sand. An' you don't have to swing it hard. Even a lady can knock a man out easy. Can't they, Miss Kitty?"

She nodded. "I fixed it yesterday afternoon. Just to be safe. You never know what will happen. Then—when I saw that knife in Sam's hand, I had to use it."

She hesitated and folded her hands in her lap, then looked up at Sam Sloan. "You're going to hate hearing this. And you're going to hate me. That will make it easier.

"We've pulled this stunt before," she went on steadily, looking at Pat, now. "Fred and I have. He thought it up. The first time was only about a week after we were married. Ten years ago. I was fifteen years old. I lived on a farm in Kansas when I met him, and we eloped a week later.

"I hated him as soon as I found out what kind of man he was. But I couldn't go home. I had to do what he wanted. He made me invite a man up to my hotel room—and then he came in and frightened the man and made him pay a hundred dollars to be let off.

I ran away from Fred the next day. I could sing, and I started entertaining in saloons to make a living. But Fred found me. He needed me to help him blackmail people. He pulled that same badger game on a couple

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

of men for low stakes, and then he figured out this scheme."

Kitty paused to shrug her bare shoulders. "He planned it very carefully, choosing a small town with a crooked sheriff. We tried it first in Montana and it worked. The man thought he'd killed Fred, and paid the sheriff a thousand dollars to hush it up. The sheriff kept two hundred and gave Fred the rest.

"That was the first time," she went on tonelessly. "I've run away from him three times, but Fred has always found me. I was too good a meal ticket for him to let me go.

"That's enough so you'll understand how we worked it. Then I came to Dutch Springs. And I met Sam who had eight thousand dollars in the bank."

KITTY drew in a long breath and looked up at Sam. "I'd never minded doing it an awful lot before," she confessed. "The other men were always pretty terrible. It was their fault for going after a woman the way they went after me. They, at least, deserved what they got. But you were different." Her voice trembled. "I never really knew a man like you before. You didn't think I was bad just because I sang in a saloon. You didn't try to—act like other men always had.

"I wrote Fred I wouldn't do it to you," she went on fiercely. "I hope you'll believe that, Sam. But he laughed at me. He thought I'd gone crazy. Then he accused me of hoping to get all your money for myself—and he threatened to tell you the truth about me unless I went on.

"I couldn't stand for you to know, Sam. I felt that anything would be better. So when Jeth Purdue was appointed sheriff, I wrote for him to come on. And that's—the way it was," she ended faintly.

"The damn skunk!" Sam said angrily. "He had it comin' no matter how he got it. But you know dang well I killed him. You can't—"

"No, Sam. You didn't." Kitty insisted wearily. "Everything went just as we'd planned it till you pulled

(Continued On Page 106)

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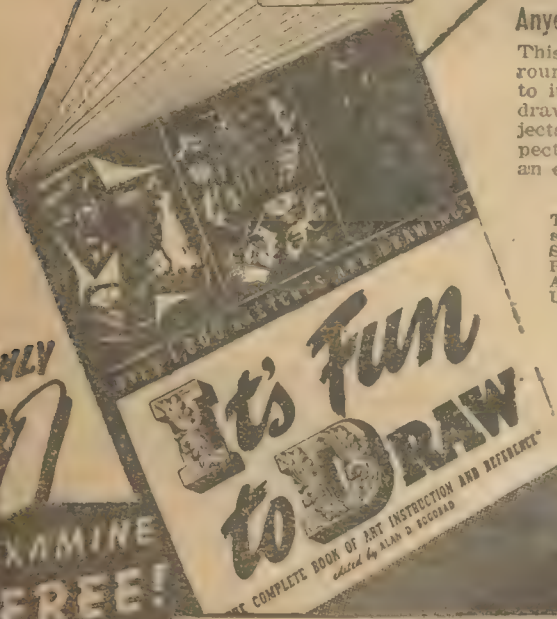

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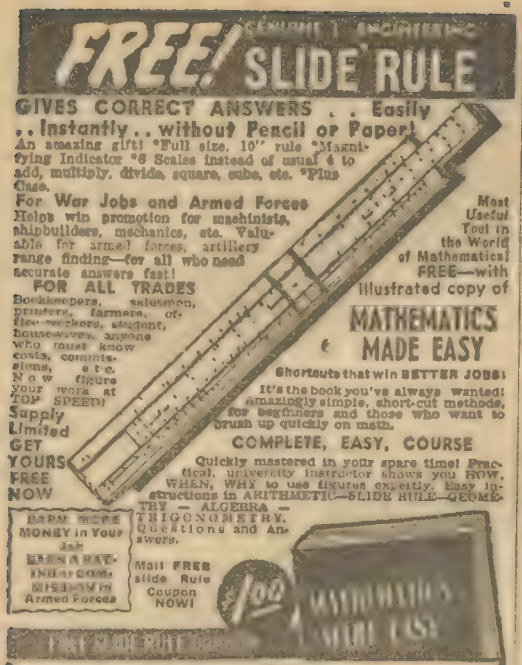
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(Continued From Page 104)

that knife. I knocked you out just before you reached him.

"Then he lay down and I poured blood on him and on your knife and ran in for Ezra," she went on steadily. "I got him to carry you out, and promised to see Mr. Purdue about fixing it. I went downstairs and waited for Mr. Purdue to come. He was supposed to be there at seven-thirty. But he didn't come and I began to get worried. I slipped up to my room to see if everything was all right—and there was Fred lying on the floor pretending to be dead. With your knife right beside him."

She shuddered violently at the memory and wrung her hands together. "I don't know what came over me," she whispered almost inaudibly. "I saw that was my chance. I've hated him for years." Her voice rang out strongly. "All at once I saw how I could get away from him forever without paying for my crime. You and Ezra thought you'd killed him. Purdue was willing to cover it.

"I guess I went crazy for just a minute. I picked up your knife and stabbed him. It was easy. He hardly moved at all. And—I couldn't pull the knife out." Her voice rose hysterically. "It was as though his corpse was still fighting me in death. It wouldn't come loose. I had to go off and leave it there. I don't know what became of it."

Pat cleared his throat. He said, "It was stuck tight. I found it in him just like you said when I first came up here. I saw 'twas Sam's knife an' I pulled it out an' hid it until I could find out more about what happened."

"Don't look at me like that," Kitty called out wretchedly to Sam. "I did it because I loved you. Do you hear me? Because I loved you. With him dead, I thought—"

Sam cleared his throat loudly. He stared down at her bowed head, then sat on the bed beside her. He put his arm about her bare, shaking shoulders and said, "I don't blame you, Kitty. I don't blame you none a-tall."

"But I'm afraid the jury will," said Joe Deems harshly. "It's not going to make a very pretty story in court."

(Continued On Page 108)

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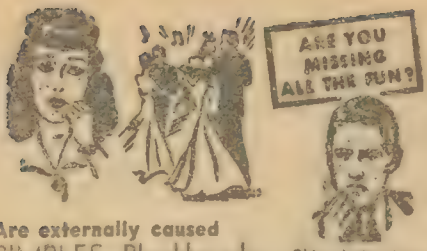

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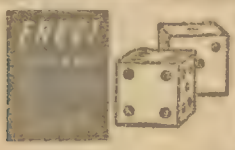

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(Continued From Page 106)

"That's right," Pat agreed mildly. "Your part isn't goin' to sound very pretty."

Deems snorted, "My part?"

"Sure. You were in with 'em. They needed you to help pretend to get rid of the body an' keep Sam an' Ezra fooled. Ralston told me all about that," he added.

Deems looked confused, but he shrugged and said, "You'll have a hard time proving I had any part in it. They'll hang Kitty," he ended venomously.

"Why, no. I don't reckon they will, Deems."

Sam and Kitty both looked up at him with a start. Pat disregarded them. "You know she didn't do nothin' but stick a knife in a dead man," he told Deems quietly. "That's not a hangin' offense."

"Into a dead man?" gasped Deems.

"Sure. That's why the knife came out so hard. Knives always stick tight in a corpse. Seems like there's a suction or somethin' that holds 'em. Just like Miss Kitty noticed when she tried to pull it out."

"You mean I did it, then?" Sam leaped to his feet gladly.

"Not you, Sam. Joe Deems. He killed Fred Ralston."

DEEMS laughed out loud. "Just how do you figure that?"

"It's the only way it does figure," Pat told him earnestly. He turned to Kitty. "Didn't you leave your husband lyin' on his back that first time when he was playin' dead?"

"Yes."

"That's what Ezra said," Pat grunted. "But he was lyin' on his face when you came back to the room. An' he didn't move when you stuck him. He was already dead. Morgan, here, told us he was stabbed twice. Once in front an' once in the back. Deems had slipped in before you with the same idea you had, Kitty. You're not any more a murderer than I am."

Deems laughed again. "Why do you think I'd do that?"

"Because you loved Kitty," Pat told him harshly. "You were crazy about her. You saw a good chance to

(Continued On Page 110)

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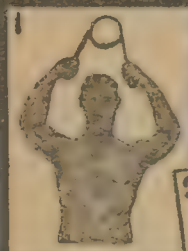

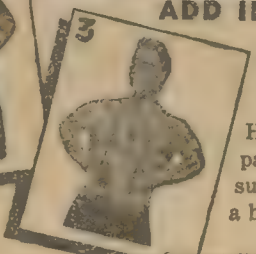

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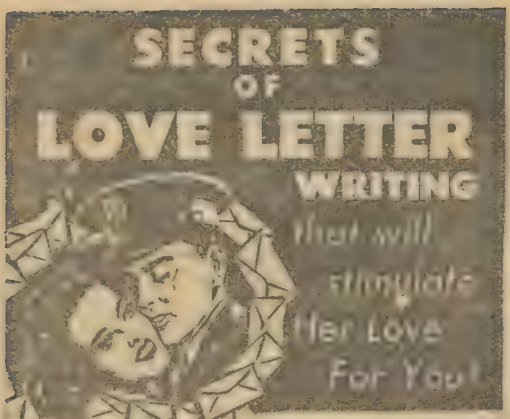

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(Continued From Page 108)

get rid of her husband an' lay the blame on Sam. Hell, 'twas a perfect setup. You couldn't pass it by."

"You'd better have your head examined," Joe Deems laughed.

"I admit it took me a long time to see how 'twas. But that's not all. You killed Jeth, too. When you found out I had him locked up, you got scared. You knew he'd break down an' tell everything if I questioned him. So you slipped out an' shot him through the jail window with a mate to that forty-five derringer I took off you while the shootin' was goin' on back of the bank."

Deems snorted, "Try an' prove it."

"But you made a mistake when you killed Ralston," Pat went on gravely. "You found out afterward that Kitty was really sweet on Sam. It hadn't done any good to kill her husband. You'd just fixed it so she an' Sam could get married. That pretty near drove you crazy. So, when you heard Sam was comin' back to ride the mail, you decided to finish what you'd started. You hired Mex Joe an' Ben Larkin to dry-gulch him on his ride."

"Who says so?"

"Ben Larkin says so. I got him locked up in jail right now. Where you missed was by not killin' him too, Joe."

Deems took a backward step and showed them a stubby .45 derringer in his hand, a mate to the one in Pat's pocket.

"I'm going out that side door," he announced without a tremor in his voice. "Anybody wants to eat lead—try to stop me."

He took another backward step, and another toward the side door.

Sam's body left the bed beside Kitty as though it were driven by a catapult. His shoulders struck the hotel proprietor's knees and they tumbled to the floor together.

There was a muffled explosion as they fell. Deems' body went limp on top of Sam.

Sam shoved the body off him and looked at it wonderingly. "Right through the heart," he said in an awed voice. "With his own derringer."

(Continued On Page 112)

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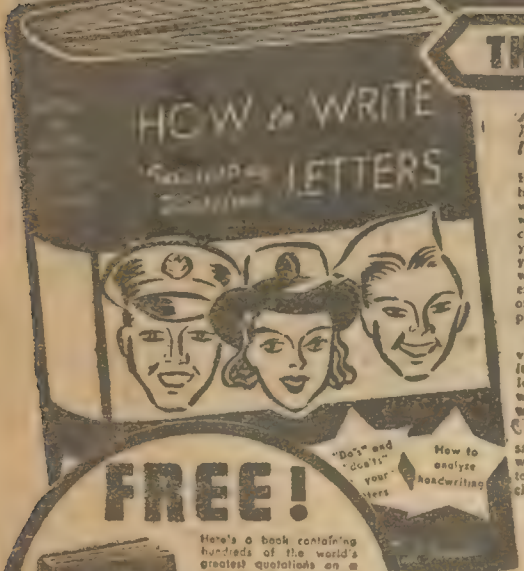

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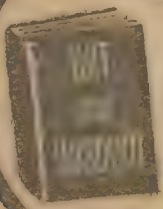

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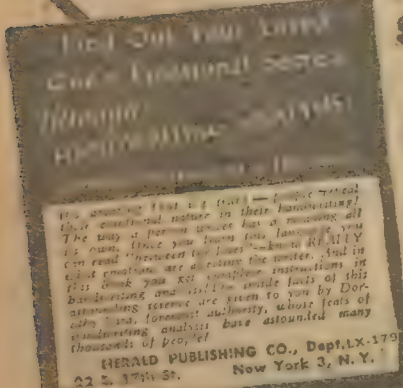
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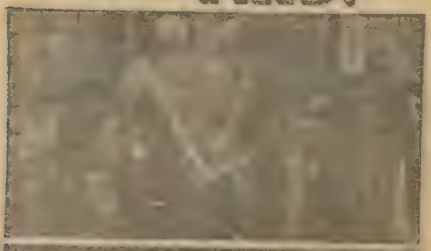

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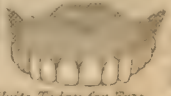

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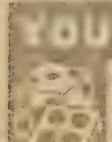

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(Continued From Page 110)

Pat said, "That'll save Powder Valley a trial." He looked at Harold Morgan. "I'd call it suicide—on account of him having already committed two murders an' us catchin' up with him."

Morgan said, "Looks like suicide to me."

Pat said quietly, "That leaves only us four that knows anything about all this. I don't reckon anybody needs to know anything more than that Joe Deems killed Ralston an' Jeth Purdue for reasons unknown an' then committed suicide. That the way you see it, Morgan?"

The rancher glanced behind him at Sam and Kitty who were locked in a tight embrace. He said soberly, "That's the way it looks to me, Pat. And I don't believe we're needed here any longer."

Pat looked behind him and chuckled. "It sure don't look like it," he agreed. "In fact, I better be ridin' to tell Sally the news. Never did see a woman like her for likin' to fix up for a weddin'."

THE END

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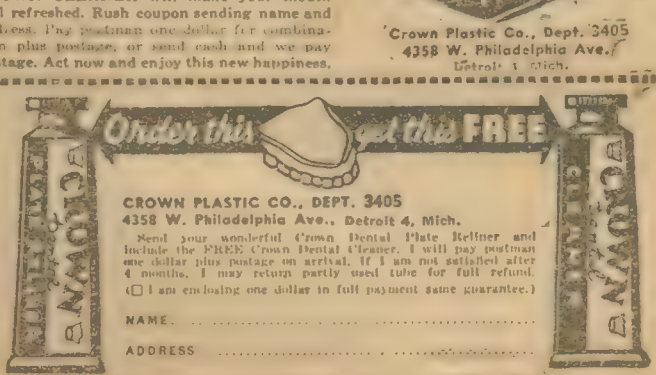
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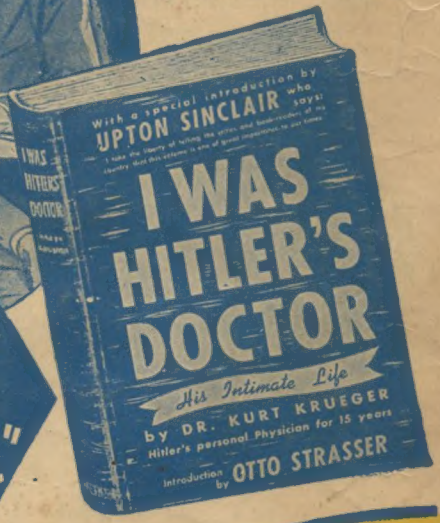
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